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PLANET stories

A.N.C.

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PLANET STORIES



VOL. 6, No. 7

A FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINE

SUMMER, 1954

▶ *Book-length Novel of Distant Worlds*

DAWN OF THE DEMI-GODS Raymond Z. Gallun 54

As unheralded as ghosts, but as significant as a new dawn of history, they came to Earth from Ganymede's glowing crescent—three micro-androids, minuscule beings, carrying the moot treasure of immortality.

▶ *Five Star-flung Short Stories*

MARY ANONYMOUS Bryce Walton 4

There wasn't one person on all of Terra to even suspect. No worry about security, saboteurs or spies in this interspatial war with Mars. Earth was firmly united this time . . . that is, of course, if you just happened to overlook Mary—the sweetest, most incongruous little girl ever to hang around a secret launching site.

THE OGRE TEST Robert Sheckley 16

Which monster was telling the truth—Almoarua, the fur-skinned giant, or Irik, the long-tailed runt? Earth's best brains futilely sought the answer as the proclaimed Day of Doom approached.

THE LAST MONSTER* James McKimmey, Jr. 28

He was a lonely man on an ugly planet, and you couldn't rightly blame him for trying to save face.

COLOR BLIND Charles A. Stearns 34

Up into the blackness of space swept the colored, miraculous mists of Venus—a glorious fountain of youth to all women; all except naive Sukey Jones.

THE AMBASSADORS OF FLESH Poul Anderson 42

Where they came from or where they went, no one knew. Yet a thousand young maidens of Varrak were missing; hidden somewhere amid the wild stars of the barbarian hordes. Who but dude Flandry stood a chance of tracking them through the asteroid wastes?

THE VIZIGRAPH 2

At arms, fen, the mail is here.

Cover Illustration by Kelly Freas

T. T. SCOTT, President

JACK O'SULLIVAN, Editor

MALCOLM REISS, Mgr. Editor

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THE VIZIGRAPH

Recessions, depressions; back movements, side movements; high cost of living, less value for your dollar. So goes the economic talk here and there and everywhere, and while we would be most exhilarated to be able to nimbly thrust aside such palaver, hard facts prevent it. Rest easy, fen, for we do not expect to enter into a lengthy tirade on economics at this point . . . merely wish to state that PLANET—for the time being—shall be issued but four times each year instead of the usual six, and that with the removal of one signature from the insides the new page count shall be ninety-six.

Robust PLANET has survived more than one dip . . . it will bounce back from this one too, my friends, perhaps even to a monthly. Let's keep our faces turned toward the bright side and hope for the best. Meantime, with an extra month between sales dates, La Vizi should have more letters, funnier letters, crazier letters, and letters more interesting and informative. There's a heavy batch right here.

The three winners of illustrations for their missives in the May issue are: (1) Burton Beerman; (2) Edward L. Morton; (3) John G. Fletcher.

PRIESTESS OF THE STAR-LOVERS

125 Bausman Street
Pittsburgh 10, Pa.

Dear Editor,

May I warn you in advance that I am writing this letter for the sole purpose of taking issue with a comment made in a letter by Joe Keogh in the March issue. I have no quarrel with Joe personally, but when I saw the following lines of his letter, I just about "flipped":

"... the old days have gone by us. While her name still has attracting power, Leigh Brackett doesn't write as well as she used to. She hasn't been able to change her style, to adapt to the needs of present day science fiction."

Thus J. K. tosses his gage. Herein do I pick it up. Incidentally, the reason I am attempting to thrash this out in La Vizi is not (only) that I am an exhibitionist, but because I am interested in finding out what other fen think on the subject.

Anyway: It seems to me that there are classifications of fen, divided as to interests. Example of this is the worn-out *science-fiction* vs. *science-fiction* clash. To elaborate, there is a group to whom the mesh and whir and roar of as yet uninvented machines holds attraction, and another group who enjoy reading and thinking about the unexplored frontiers of the mind. It seems quite possible for an individual to belong to more than one of these groups simultaneously, and—here is what I am getting at—it is quite possible to move from one group to another, merely by becoming interested in a different type of s-f. Perhaps Keogh has done this.

For there is a group of fen—to which Joe may have once be-

longed, and may yet belong, but in a lesser sense—who are fan not because of any particularly scientific turn of mind, but only because they love the stars. They stand by night under the thousand-colored rain of stars, and look up and watch and wonder. Out in the dark spaces hang their strange worlds—and these, to them, are their Beautiful Countries. These are the lilac hills and pale golden plains—the strangely hued skies that bleed strange rain from the jagged knives of dark lightning—and there is the alien music unheard across the stretched-out light years. Sometimes the star-lovers must stop looking up, for the beauty and the longing and endless reaching out is too much to bear for long.

It is hard for them to speak their feelings, but some have the gift. Many of their voices are heard only haltingly or hesitantly, but above the tide rises one voice predominant—Brackett's.

Prophetess and priestess of the star-lovers is she; standing on the edge of Now, she looks out into the whirling darkness of the future and her mind's eyes discern a cavalcade of pictures showing the Todays that might have been, and the Tomorrows that may yet be.

It is true that Brackett has not changed. While readers' individual tastes may vary, and fan come and go, Leigh Brackett remains as the singer-laureate who chronicles our sometime years—the years we call Tomorrow.

And because she has not changed, some of us are vastly glad.

Sincerely,
JEAN MACKINTOSH

GHOST MAG?

Don Wegas
2444 Valley St.
Berkeley 2, Calif.

Dear Jack:

In the March issue there is a letter from some fan who calls herself Hazel Irene Stamper. This is, I think, the pen name for some well known fan who gets a large charge out of writing letters like that. I may be wrong, but I don't think so. Even that address looks familiar to me. But if I'm wrong, it should prove interesting to see what this person says in coming issues. By the way, unless she has two heads nobody would call her a 'fen.' Fen, you see, is the plural of fan.

Your lead story, THE MAN THE TECH-MEN MADE, was pretty good. My opinion of this story is slightly biased since I skipped about 10 pages of it. It still made sense, though, and since it did, I am forced to admit it was a good story. It moved fast enough, but it didn't hold my interest. With all the gooks with strange sounding names running in and out at all hours of the night, I got confused. But everything turned out all right in the end, I see. Kane got his girl, and the senator got his.

The direct opposite of this story was one that held my attention right down to the wire. THE GALACTIC GHOST was its name, and it presented a few good things to think about. The only other stories I thought were good came under the heading of humor. GRANDMA PERKINS and the you-know-who's came out close to the top, but that shaggy dog story MIMSY'S JOKE just beat it out. There they are, one, two, three and four. Do with them what you will.

One thing I have been noticing (and some other people have too) is the Depression. I don't mean the one that the Democrats are saying is here, but the science fiction depression. Two of the better known

pulp have gone from bi-monthly to quarterly; one of the lesser pulps has folded, rumors are circulating about some of the digest sizes. But to switch an old saying, there's nothing more sure than life, death, and PLANET. Yep, you seem to be holding your own, even though half of organized fandom thinks that PLANET is fit for only neo-fans and insomniacs. Is it that you print fewer copies, or just ignore your loss? Something must be revolutionary down at Love Romances. Nothing human could have kept PLANET afloat for this long.

Now I didn't mean to hurt your feelings, but that's the way it looks from where I sit. For instance: out my way, at the corner drug store about 6 copies of PLANET are left by the distributor every other month. After I buy my copy, there are 5 left. Some other person must take pity on you, because after awhile only 4 copies remain. Sometimes those 4 copies last out the two-month intervals, but most of the time, 3 copies are taken back by the distributing company. You must sell the remaining issues as scrap. Or maybe you roll it up into little rolls and use it for ... adding machine paper.

I agree with the majority of your readers that PLANET should keep its old pulp, ragged edges, sexy covers, format. It makes PLANET stand out at the news stand. Why, it isn't every magazine that has the choice of position on the mag lineup. PLANET can have one of two spots: spot (1) behind comic book section; spot (2) in back of the READER'S DIGEST. I must admit that RD doesn't cover up too much of your cover, but then they usually place PLANET rupture-easer advertisement out. Rather funny when I reach for it, too! My friends invariably ask me if I'm getting old and have to subscribe to that type of mag. They think it's the Rupture-Easer Journal.

But I don't mind—much. I have learned to put up with that sort of stuff. My mother saw my last letter in PLANET and thought it was real nice. Being the mildly exuberant type, she showed it to one of the neighbors. I happened to be in the same room at the time it happened. The lady looked at the cover (the sexless one at that) and uttered those familiar words that shall haunt me for years. She said, "THIS is the kind of stuff that is ruining the younger generation." So what could I say? Well, I said it.

I pulled out a copy of LIFE and showed her a feature article on the new sex craze. She subscribes to LIFE, so it was that much more devastating. "Very interesting article," she said. Then she went on to read my letter telling about the people that criticize sf for lurid covers. I haven't seen her around the house lately, although my mother goes over her house every so often. Ah, it is a PROUD thing to be a fan!

But that is beside the point. One thing that brings me great comfort is the knowledge that my English teacher reads sf. Even started a science fiction discussion panel up there. It didn't work out, though. It evolved into a discussion of progressive education. I quit. I'm even doing a paper on the Shaver Mystery. A real fair person, that teacher.

The length of LA VIZI was perfect in the March issue. It might even be to your advantage to take the space from that short-short story and fill it up with letters. And yes, by all means, get some life into LA VIZI. If I had anything on my mind at the moment that seemed controversial I'd practice what I preach, but being utterly devoid of any ideas, I'll leave that up to the other guy.

Yes, PLANET is plodding down the road, leaving not a trace of its passing. It comes out regularly, has some good stories, has a fair letter column. As long as you don't go direct size, I'll be happy.

(Continued on page 33)

*A section of the cowlings slid back.
The helio slowed, hung suspended.
Mary aimed slightly upward. She felt
the automatic sight adjuster clicking
delicately, the slight tug as the
mags tilted the barrel directly into
the meticulous balance of
the firing jets*

*Illustration by
Edward Emshwiller*





MARY ANONYMOUS

By BRYCE WALTON

There wasn't one person on all of Earth to even suspect. No worry about security, saboteurs or spies in this interspatial war with Mars. Earth was firmly united this time . . . that is, of course, if you just happened to overlook Mary—the sweetest, most incongruous little girl ever to hang around a launching site.

TEN miles out of New Washington the duralium observation tower was a slim needle stuck in the ground. Three officers of the UN High Command waited at the top of it, within view of the rocket. They waited for zero hour. They were Major-General Engstrand, Lt. Colonel Morgenson, and Major Schaffer.

At 0500, Professor Michelson entered. He still wore a chemical-stained smock, a faded shirt and a pair of baggy trousers. He sat down in a dissolving way indicating a vast accumulated weariness. He felt old,

very old, now that the last big project was finished.

"The G-Agent's all loaded," he finally said. "Three tons." He looked out the window. "You may give the firing orders, sir," he said to Major-General Engstrand.

Relief sighed voicelessly in the tower room.

Schaffer also looked out the window. Morgenson contemplated his fingernails. Engstrand stood very straight, filled with the magnitude of this moment's promise of final victory. Then he grabbed up the

phone. "All right, Burkson. Everything's set. The rocket will go as scheduled."

He sat down and wiped slowly at his puffy but somehow powerful face.

The slim and calm Schaffer turned, got a bottle out of the liquor cabinet, poured four drinks. "We've worked long and hard," he said. "A toast to a well earned victory, gentlemen."

They drank.

Michelson was thinking, not of a well earned victory, but of retirement and rest. Forty years he had worked. For victory over the Eurasians. After that, for victory over the Martians. He wanted to sleep late, fish and rest in the sun.

"Three tons of G-Agent," Engstrand said softly.

The rocket would hit Mars. Countless other rockets would fly out of it, each directed, each exploding and casting out its deadly sprays and gases of the G-agent.

"Within an hour," Morgenson said, "after the rocket hits, there won't be a bug, a germ, a piece of lichen left alive. Unless somebody sends it there, there won't be anything alive on Mars again for a long time."

"I'd still like to know what kind of life it is," Schaffer said.

Michelson looked at the floor. "Now we'll never know."

"But we'll stay alive to speculate about it, and some day maybe they'll figure how to get a man across space. And then we'll know what died up there."

There was a chance, Michelson knew, but a very slim one, that something might go wrong. The rocket might crash on the Earth somewhere. But no one else probably even dared to think about it. None of them were as old nor as tired as Michelson. A lot of people would die. Just in case the Martians might have something in the way of gases as deadly as the G-agent, the population had been supplied with hypos of antidote, gas masks, and suiting. But still, so many people would die. However such a thing was very highly improbable.

They drank again.

Engstrand put his hand on Michelson's bowed shoulders. "Again you've done a magnificent job, old friend." His voice was low. "Three weeks ahead of schedule. That time advantage may have saved us all. God

knows what the Martians are getting ready to send now!"

"One thing we can be thankful for," Schaffer said. "No spies. No worry about security, no saboteurs. Of course the Martians are lucky too—or were—in that respect." He looked thoughtfully into his glass. "The Martians did us a favor really. They created world unity. A psychologist couldn't have predicted it. But think of that—since the war with Mars, no human being has ever tried to sabotage anything directed at defeating the Martians!"

"It's natural enough. This time it's humans against—well—God knows what! But nothing human." Engstrand poured himself another drink. "No human being has had anything to identify with in the enemy's camp. You're right, Major. In a way, the Martians did us a favor. And now we'll do them one—one last favor. They're too damn evil to live, and they'll sure be glad, somewhere in their guts, to be finished off!"

Schaffer turned to Michelson, and grinned. "Where's Mary?"

"She wasn't feeling well," Michelson said. "I left her out at Lake House." He stood up. Quietly, he said. "Good-bye, gentleman. I'm going home, to Lake House. I'm tired."

"Aren't you going to watch the rocket blast?"

Michelson shook his head. "I think not."

They all shook hands with Michelson. "Write us, will you, Mike," Engstrand said. "Let us hear from you often."

"Of course," Michelson said. At the door he turned, an old man, stooped by years of devotion to more and more deadly chemicals. "If you need me, I'll still be at Lake House."

HE WENT out of the observation room and stood for a moment looking at the elevator that waited with an open mouth. He had always been with G-2. Back when they had started over again in the ruins of World War III he had been in charge of various space-going projects aimed at a quick defeat of the Eurasians, and this always included the latest complex developments in bacteriological warfare, and the use of liquid and atmospheric gases. He

had sent the first New Era test rocket into space, the first one to the moon, the first ones to Mars.

Instruments far in advance of the original telemetering and servomotor devices, had measured temperature, radiation, chemical makeup of atmosphere, minerals, various field effects, measured and catalogued all life, even to its cultural development, then sent back their measurements and evaluations on ultra-high-frequency to ground observers on Earth.

He had sent out the first rockets with monkeys, rats, guinea pigs and birds to test the effects of alien conditions on living organisms. No human being had ever survived. They stopped trying.

But the Martians had been carrying on a program much the same. They had been frightened. They had sent deadly rockets. The war had begun, a fantastic push-button operation between worlds millions of miles apart. This Earth rocket loaded with three tons of G-agent was what the UN hoped would be the last retaliatory gesture in a number of years of interspatial bickering. For it was also evident now that no Martian could get across space to Earth.

Michelson sighed, stepped into the elevator and started home. Home to rest, fish, lie in the sun. Home to Mary who kept him occupied and entertained in his loneliness.

But Mary had not been ill. She had not stayed at Lake House either. She had been aboard Michelson's helio, hiding in the luggage compartment. She had the key to Michelson's office and she was there.

But her head ached now. She hadn't slept for two days, thinking about what had to be done. Her head ached worse now as the wave directives came again and again, bringing new bursts of coercive pain with any deep emotional hint of possible resistance.

Now, in fact, there was doubt in Mary's mind that there was any desire to resist the directives, or if there ever had been. Now even those lingering wonderings about the possibility of doubt brought pain.

Better just to act. And it was time.

The clock gave her exactly one hour, she knew, to destroy the central building sector, the heart of the giant UN Research Foundation, and also wreck the rocket due

to blast for Mars. She had heard Daddy Mike say what time the rocket would blast if he got the G-Agent loaded on schedule, and she knew he had done that.

There was little if any caution exercised at the Foundation. It had been well established by years of precedent that humans just didn't sabotage an effort directed at aliens. Especially Martians who, time and time again, had almost brought destruction to earth in innumerable unexpected ways. Added to that was the fact that no Martian could get across the void to take care of it directly, any more than an Earthman could to Mars for a similar purpose.

Mary had the advantage of this freedom. But the immediacy with which she could be identified by all the personnel about the Foundation might be a handicap as well as a possible advantage. She would have to exercise extreme caution herself.

The directives had stopped. She was on her own as long as she didn't resist the preceding orders. From this point on it was strictly Mar's responsibility.

She checked the electrodoor. No one was approaching Daddy Mike's office. She wasn't sure whether or not he would return to his office before going to Lake House. She wondered what he would do, how sad he would be, to find her gone.

From behind the rearmost, long unused files in the filing cabinet, she took the capsule of G-Agent. There was enough of the nerve gas in the ten ounce container to destroy everyone in the building, within half an hour after it was thrown into the ventilator shaft.

She went to the wall, pressed the button, and the opening was revealed by a sliding panel. Without hesitation, she tossed in the capsule of G-Agent. Dully, she remembered how she had collected it, painfully over a period of months, drop by drop and stored it in the special non-corrosive alloy of the container. She had access to all of Daddy's laboratory equipment.

The container would explode in half an hour. Thirty minutes to get outside the buildings and over to the pits and the lethal rocket.

She felt nothing but a kind of depersonalized tension of responsibility as she removed her hat and took the small deadly

neutron beam gun from the tiny sling she had fixed inside. She put the hat back on and tied the ribbon under her chin. The hat had caused much amused reaction from those friends of Daddy Mike who had become accustomed to her being constantly with the old man.

She ran into the bright shine of the tubular metal hall. She hoped with a flash of unexpected feeling that Daddy Mike would leave the building before the G-Agent was activated.

He loved her. Her heart throbbed painfully as she remembered how much Daddy loved her. How he had held her on his lap and stroked her hair and philosophized endlessly to her, not caring that she was not supposed to understand such complexity. But sharing this as he did all things with her in his aging loneliness.

She crouched there in the hall and thought of that, how she would love Daddy as Daddy loved her. Except that she was incapable of love. Dimly she remembered that once, long, very long ago, there had been a kind of spontaneous expression of physical desire, and sensuous pleasure, from the contact with others. But since then there had been the experiments, endless, too painful to recall. The bursting of blood and the repair, the brain slicing and the laying open of cells, and the sewing up. Years, a lifetime, a foreverness of pain, and the apparent making good as new again. But the scars were too deep too show, and too deep to mend.

Such pain for so long, the cold objective testing, had killed any capacity for love. Mary was convinced of that.

She held the gun to her left side and ran in nakedness and silence down the glowing tube.

An overweight guard in his brown UN uniform eased around the curve in the tube and stood with his back to her. It was a good place for him to walk what was to him a useless beat. There was nothing to guard against but boredom. This was the building's left wing and fairly isolated, and he could merely stand here and wait for the far end of his shift.

She slid along the wall. Her feet moved with a vague whispering silence, the silence of unconscious stealth. But then the

guard turned to place his heel more comfortably on the inward-sloping bottom of the tube. And he saw her.

He grinned. "Mary!" he said. Everyone knew her. And everyone loved Mary. "What are you doing out here?"

He could never guess the truth, she thought. Even if someone told you, you would never believe it.

The good humor spontaneously beginning to bubble from the fat guard was changed into a kind of gasping cough of unbelieving fear. Desperate words filtered out through his teeth. A white line moved around his lips. His hands reached out and hung suspended.

"Mary—Oh God, Mary—the gun, that's—that's a real gun, Mary—"

The charge was light. It contacted the Guard's face just above the chin. It dissolved instantly all of his face and most of his brain. It left only a smeared shell of bone behind, like a bowl tipped up.

She ran on down the slightly curving tube. *They were never never so kind to me. For he is free from the directives that pull and push and pry and pick at the brain. He is free from pain.*

When this was done, she would be free. As free as the guard.

Once near the rocket, the long task would be ended. She would then theoretically be free from the complex thought which her body was incapable of handling without pain. Free from the pain of an imbalanced body and nervous system. And free of the coercion bands, the directive waves that could sometimes rip the cells apart.

She pressed the down button of the elevator. At that moment the high scream of the alarm sirens shrieked in her ears. She cowered a moment. It came from all around. It bathed her in painful sound. It became a pervading throb that seemed to come from the metal everywhere.

They had discovered the guard already. That was one of those unpredictable elements. Purely chance that anyone would have passed there just after the guard was killed. That could be the only reason for the alarm!

She had to get outside the buildings! She had to get over there near enough to

the rocket to blast the firing tubes! She wasn't even off the tenth floor.

There was nothing to fear except failure. Death itself would be a welcome if not a preferred kind of freedom for her. But if she failed and lived, there would be torture. And the misty worlds of pain, not only in the labs but from the coercion directives. As far as she knew, perhaps the directive rocket buried somewhere high in the pines near the lake would contain even more duties for her, if this failed. Except that now she would be known and they would hunt her down and—but so far they did not know who had killed the guard.

No, if they caught her they wouldn't kill her. That was sure enough. There would be the labs again. They would probe, cut her open, try to find out why. She had long been a living instrument for finding out why.

As the elevator dropped, the walls pulsed with the screams of the alarms.

She had one advantage she realized that she had been doubtful of earlier. She was Mary, and everyone knew and loved her. Though it was definite now that a saboteur was loose inside the Foundation, there was nothing so far to connect Mary with such a fact.

She concealed the gun in the sling inside her cap, and tied the ribbon firmly under her chin. When the elevator reached the first floor, the panel slid back. She was tensed to run out, but a group of Foundation guards were running for the opening. Their faces were twisted into various expressions of tense terror. They were all inside a gigantic gas capsule, they knew that, one of terrible potential lethality. Evidently it was suspected that the G-Agent might be used.

Mary ran out, turned, leaped for the narrowing gap between the guards and the arched opening that led into the court. Most of the guards scarcely noticed her at all, and if they did they evidently figured it was hardly anything to cause diversion from the awful emergency.

But one of them, a man named Jonathan who had often caressed her and expressed his love for her, smiled. It was a kind of conditioned reaction that broke the frozen fear of his mouth and cheeks. He leaned toward her, his hand outstretched.

"Mary—this is no place for you, baby. You'd better come back up with us."

The invisible mouth of the intercom spoke. "The saboteur may be heading for the rocket which must blast on schedule. Already deadly gases may have been released inside the Foundation. Sections five and six will establish instant cordon around the rocket pits. Anyone not obeying security instructions will be shot instantly. Anyone entering or leaving the Foundation buildings or grounds without proper identification will be shot. All guards will immediately put on masks, and protective suiting, and will prepare antidote injections. Sections seven and eight will search the main wing. Sections nine and ten—"

"Come on, John!" someone yelled from the elevator. Kits were falling open. Masks were unfolding. Suit capsules were exploding under compressed air, and the special suits were breaking out in fluffs of green.

"Hey, for God's sake, Johnny, come on!" The voices were ragged with fear.

A warning would also, Mary knew, be going out to all civilians made susceptible immediately by inversion, movements of predictable winds. But Mary knew that many would die, many many would die, when the rocket crashed. If she could succeed.

Only for that inevitable percentage who would die in great pain did she have any recognizable sympathy. She had a duty, else she herself would experience greater and greater pain.

"You'd better come along with us, Mary baby," Jonathan said. He reached for her, while the others yelled at him. The intercom itself was toned with terror that was in the walls and in every man's eyes and his voice and the stance of his body.

Mary giggled. She started a kind of disarming dance. But this time it did not excite the laughter and general response it usually did.

Her stomach turned sickeningly as she felt the release, the ribbon fluttering and the cap falling. The thud and the bright shining spin of the gun over the mosaicked floor. The sling had broken.

She danced toward it.

Jonathan yelled, but the voices of the others snapped off into a pulsing silence.

Then an incredulous murmur trickled over the floor.

"Mary—what are you doing with that? Mary—stop—wait, Mary—"

Desperately, Jonothan dived to the floor. He clawed. He kicked with his frantic feet for traction on the floor. He screamed at her as he pawed to reach the gun. But she leaped over him and turned with the gun ready.

Jonothan was slowly standing up. His face was white. His lips moved. His throat trembled. But no words came out.

Behind him, a voice shivered. "Give us the gun, Mary."

Pleading, cajoling, shaking, other voices joined.

"Mary—give us the gun now!"

"Please, Mary, you can kill people—"

"You just give Uncle Patrick the gun now, honey, and—"

She was backing away toward the arched opening. Beyond that were the gardens, the fountains the pretty landscape of the courts. Beyond that were the helio landings, and then the pits. It wasn't so far.

Jonothan was trying to smile at her as he reached again for the gun. Behind him, the others stood immobile and without any more words. The intercom had words, but no one was listening now.

SHE fired a much heavier charge than that against the guard on the tenth floor. Between Jonothan's outstretched arms which had held her with love, his torso and head disappeared. His arms fell and the legs toppled like parts of a mannequin. Beyond the vacancy that had been Jonothan, several others tried to draw their guns. All were abruptly reduced to jellied and smoking anonymity. Mary ran for the courts.

She heard herself giggling without recognizable meaning as she ran under the rainbowed fountains, leaped the flower hedges, and skimmed over the carefully designed green of lawn patches.

She still had that initial advantage. No one still could logically connect her with what was happening. So far there were no living witnesses. At least it was unlikely that there were.

She was a little behind her schedule and every second was now important. Where

before there had been allowed some margin for error, now there was none.

She wanted to get a helio. She wanted to get as far up wind and as far into the air as possible when the G-Agent began drifting over the land. She wanted to live for the reasons she had thought about before, many times. She couldn't say that her life was important to her now any more than it ever had been. It had never been her life, not in her memory. Always she had been the instrument of others. She could blast the rocket back to earth from inside a helio, and keep on from there to some degree of personal safety.

That was the plan.

As she ran she wondered with a kind of dull throbbing hope if after this task was fulfilled, she would be free of the Martian directives. She didn't know. She could only hope.

Long after the high degree of intelligence she now possessed came to her, (that too having been something imposed to increase her effectiveness as an instrument) she had prayed to be free of pain and imprisonment. Even where there was not the capacity to formulate any awareness of her merely being used, or of being a prisoner of others, she had felt the primitive cellular discontent that had now become open and passionate desire for freedom.

Maybe after this was done, she would be free for the first time that she could really remember. What she could do with it, where she could go, where she could hide with it, whether she could even live to enjoy it, if in fact she could enjoy something she had never had, was really not of much consequence to her as she ran and thought about it. Even one brief flare of freedom would be its own exultant reward.

Figures made a scrambling chaos of unreality out of the area which usually displayed such a paradoxical atmosphere of quiet peacefulness. Sirens shrieked. Helios hummed and hovered nervously, then darted off in angled desperation through the slanting rays of dusk. Evidently there were a fortunate few whose emergency obligations were taking them elsewhere. And a few others, undoubtedly, who were escaping in guilt-ridden cowardice from an intolerable suspense.

She jumped, slid the cowl back, crawled into the plastoid bubble before the two-seated passenger helio. The controls were simple. She had watched Daddy Mike many times as he commuted to and from Lake House. Jokingly he had let her sit on his lap and play with the controls, not being able even to suspect what she was really learning, and what the end result would be.

As the helio whirled to lifting life, Mary did not bother with altitude. That would come later. She sent the helio skimming low over the courts and the landing plots, over the monuments and fountains, toward the pits.

Warnings would be going out across the decentralized populations of the nation. Terror would be creeping over the land as the G-Agent would creep over it soon, very soon now.

One thing she was still sure of—no one knew, or could even suspect, the identity of the saboteur they were searching for.

She heard the gasp, then a sort of whimpering moan, and that changed even as she turned with tense sharpness, to hoarse and spasmodic laughter.

She seemed geared to any emergency, so that nothing, such as this, could be a surprise. A surprise would mean temporary indecision. She could not afford that. She turned, keeping the controls level, and raised the gun.

A man was on his knees, his hands gripping one another. His eyes and teeth protruded, and saliva ran out of the corner of his mouth. Evidently he was a civilian employee, a clerk with his anonymous brown suit and his shaven head. Someone who had felt no strong identification with the plant except that it was a job, it was security. So now that it had turned into a giant gas capsule, he had only wanted to get away from it. His eyes kept bulging as they stared at Mary. They didn't believe in Mary. He was trying to laugh away what wasn't logical. But he couldn't laugh it away.

"I was told to lay off the neuro-tabs," he whispered. "The medic told me I'd start flipping—flip, flip—he said—if I took too many neuro-tabs. He was right, I've flipped. I'm gone." Then the laughter that was not

laughter really broke out all over him like a rash, and it filled the interior of the helio. "I've run away from my job when the alarm sounded!" He started screaming. "I can't go back anyway. No job—hell—I'm finished no matter what!"

He bent forward and groped for the button that would open the rear helio door. Mary lowered the gun, hoping this man's own madness would make it easier for her. Adjusting the blast so that it would kill him without releasing too much deadly kinetic energy within so small a space would be a delicate thing. It was highly dangerous.

He turned while the wind sucked at him and flapped his brown suit around his bony legs. He blinked slowly at Mary and tears ran down his cheeks. "Even if you're not real, you're the last I'll see, the last thing. So good-bye!"

The air pulled him abruptly out into its deceptive nowhere. For an instant, she felt drawn to his lonely pathway of escape. She wanted to say after him, "Good-bye," but she couldn't.

As the helio swung to the left, the rocket lifted with strange slowness, heavy and steady, on its column of fire. Reality compressed to only the helio and a narrowly restricted line between the gun and the lifting rocket.

A few other helios moved in the area, but none nearly this close to the rocket. Observers would know. Once the thing was done, she wondered if she could possibly escape. They would know that the destructive blast came from this helio.

A section of the cowl slid back. The helio slowed, hung suspended. Mary aimed slightly upward. She felt the automatic sight adjuster clicking delicately, the slight tug as the mags tilted the barrel directly into the meticulous balance of the firing jets.

As she fired, she sent the helio straight up at maximum speed and the cowl slid closed.

THIS was the end of her assignment. The gun's full charge had been exhausted. It was no longer of any use. She dropped it. She knew the hit had been direct. A glance showed the rocket already curving

in a terrible kind of deceptive gentleness away to the right over New Washington. Soon its parabola would become a screaming plunge. Nothing could divert it. To try to destroy it in the air would mean nothing, for in any case, its deadly tons of G-Agent would be spread on the winds over the land.

The Foundation and everything in it would by now be thoroughly contaminated by the G-Agent she had released inside. It would take a long time to decontaminate, to rebuild. And a lot of people were going to die, would be dying now. The antidote would save many from death. It would preserve others short of death in a state she could not envy, for to her it would be far worse than dying.

But Mary could hardly concern herself with the wrecking of the Foundation, or the people who would die. Her concern was intense—to escape, to hide. And to know for certain whether or not, now that her task was done, the agonizing coercive directions from the Martian rocket would continue.

So far there was no hint of this. She only wanted to get away. There were no invisible fingers probing in there, none of the drawing to tautness that had so many times ended in torture. Maybe, somehow, the directive rocket with its intricate mechanism was delicately equipped to know when her job was successfully done.

She would soon know.

The helio whined with strain. A shiver racked the metal. A scream burst from Mary's lips. She concentrated on her hands, forced the controls, drove the helio at maximum speed, trying to head across the park reserve toward the river and the great National Forest area.

But already they were in close pursuit. Figures were running in all directions far below.

The stars were breaking out and it was night now except for the glare of the exploding rocket far to the left. Now below the forest area shifted into view and the winding shine of the river.

Night was the best time for the spreading of the G-Agent. Inversion was right. The stuff swept along close to the ground which cooled more slowly than the air.

That, too, had been planned. The timing was right. Everything had been worked out right.

But now—what was to happen to her?

She felt none of the probing demands from the direction rocket. She felt not even a hint of them. Perhaps they had gone away forever and she was free. Free! FREE!

They wanted her alive, or her helio with her as part of it, would have been disintegrated long before this. She could understand why. The worst that she could do she had done. There was no need in killing her to prevent more sabotage. They wanted her alive. They wanted to know who she was, what she was, what organization or organizations she represented, if any. They had no idea who she was. Or at least it seemed unlikely yet that they had found out. Perhaps they even thought she was a Martian. Whatever they thought, they didn't know. She realized how desperately they had to know.

The helio dropped straight down toward the deceptive softness of the forest sea. The wind sighed around the helio as the green darkness loomed up, seeming to rush up from all sides, its softness changing suddenly into the harshness of jagged limbs and bulging trunks. She clung to the dead controls as though there were some kind of promise in them, some solidity. But everything dropped from under her, a sickening dislocation, as she clung as though she had no support, as though the earth itself were falling away.

The tearing impact was like a thousand echos of her terrors.

And the forest and the wet shine of harsh wood that tore metal and ripped like flashes of hot light, the blanket of crushing leaves, and the cooling shadows rushed smothering in around her.

Lights fingered through the leaves. She could hear footsteps, stealthy and invisible, flowing among the lights. The lights moved around, streaming in from all directions, like the shifting bars of a tightening cage.

She wasn't dead! When she moved slightly in the twisted shine of metal, a beam of light glanced from it in a blinding glare. She felt the pain from her torn leg. Her right side seemed crushed. She felt the hotness of blood burning her ribs.

She heard voices murmuring through wet leaves, caught the slight movement of protective green suiting and the shining leer of gas masks. They were far upwind now from where the rocket had crashed to spew out its lethal loads. She didn't know as she squirmed desperately through the jagged hole in the metal, whether or not one of the many subsidiary rockets had exploded up wind from this location.

It was something to look forward to.

She tried to suppress the whimpering moan as the torn leg scraped over the metal. Then she dropped to the damp leaves and crouched there and wondered which way to go. The light beams moved in, criss-crossed now like a tightening wire mesh. She crawled, digging her fingers into the leaves. The leaves whispered a call to her from above.

The light swung. Its beam flooded full and blindingly in her face. A gun came into view over the edge of the beam and feet smashed toward her through the brush.

Her only weapon was the oldest one of all. She sprang up. The beam flashed upward in a wavering circle as her hands closed on the man's throat. Her weight carried him scrambling back. His heels caught. He fell. His hands stabbed around with the gun as his breath choked off and his muscles worked with panicky power. With her left hand she dug into his windpipe. She released the other hand and tore the mask away, ripping the tough fiber like rotten cloth.

She flung the flashbeam away, dragged the guard into the brush. Light beams slashed around as she crouched among the leaves. The man no longer struggled. When she took her hand away from his throat, he still did not struggle.

A beam flashed full over her, held. Someone yelled wildly: "The guy who fell out of the helio! He was right. Oh God—he wasn't crazy!"

"Don't shoot! Don't shoot, you idiot!"

"I tell you he was right! It's Mary! The man was right—"

"Don't shoot! That's an order!"

She leaped up, caught the limb. She went on up among the thick sweet concealment of a thousand leaves. She swung into the next tree, then the next, faster and faster

she moved. The leaves skimmed past her face.

Her breath came in ecstatic gasps as the light beams faded behind, and the damp dark freedom of the trees spread away in all directions.

She knew which way to go. And she was going there a long time before she even realized the fact. She wondered vaguely for a moment then how it was that she knew where to go, for it was a long way, over the river, and through the hills and the forest.

Guards in helios whirled everywhere in the night clouds. Cars whined through the narrow roads around her. A net formed through the forest. A net of men, guns, lights, cars, helios, and many kinds of detectors.

For what seemed much longer than it was, her strength held.

IT ENABLED her to pierce the net again and again when they were sure she was trapped. She went over it, under it, through it, part of the thick night in the trees and the brush. The river was the worst, for she hated water.

But she could no longer climb through the comparative safe corridors of the trees. She could no longer run. Air sucked between her teeth. One leg dragged behind her as she crawled slowly through the dark, along the lake, up the winding path. She could only crawl. Finally crawling became a hitching dragging effort that slowed with each attempt.

Blood and dirt had formed a sticky mud over her leg and ribs and chest. Damp leaves stuck to her, and the bitter rocks of the path leading up to the cabin had cut her flesh. There were lights in the windows of Lake House. The windows and the door were open to the warm night. Beyond the cabin she could see Daddy Mike's helio on the landing.

How quiet and peaceful it is, she thought, here by the lake in the forest in the night. The moon moved from behind the clouds and spread a warm golden mist over the ground. Frogs sang from the lake below. And from all around came the insistent humming and stirrings and singings of life, but all muted and peaceful and

subdued to make the night peaceful and quiet.

She dug her fingers into the rock of the path. Her body dragged on a little at a time. She whimpered again, but not very loud. Her body flattened in a weariness that was only a little above defeat. Her face pressed to the cool stone.

"Daddy," the inexpressible thought was a whisper in her mind. "Help me, Daddy. You love me—"

She remembered the warmth inside, the old man with his warm laughter, taking her on his lap, caressing her, swinging her up on his shoulders and walking with her along the lake in the evening. She thought of the old man who loved her.

The thought gave her enough strength to reach the open door. She lay there sighing in her chest, her face pressed against the wood.

She raised her eyes to the interior of the cabin.

She tried to move nearer, tried to lift her hand up into the shaft of light. She wanted to call out, say something. Only a low inaudible moan strained through her clenched teeth.

She rolled half over. Inside then, she saw Daddy Mike. He was sitting near the big radio panel, his head bowed and resting on his hands. On the other side, through the open door, she could see the gleam of glass and metal from the big laboratory. A spasm went through her. She could hear the sounds of caged life in there.

Lights blinked on the radio panel. Michelson slowly raised his head and twisted a dial. "Yes," he said. She could hardly hear him. He seemed very tired, more tired than she had ever seen him. And much older too. Old and thin and tired.

"Mike—"

"Hello, Engstrand."

"I've got Guards on the way up there, Mike! Has that damn thing showed up yet?"

"No—not yet."

"I don't know why I never figured it would try to get back there. But that's where it's heading, we're sure of it now. Listen, Mike—if it does get up there before my men do, remember, don't kill it! Do anything you can think of, but keep it there

and don't kill it! Apparently it's wounded anyway!"

"Yes, yes," Michelson said. He brushed at his eyes.

Mary lay there, half inside the open cabin door, imprisoned by her inability to speak. She stared into the laboratory, then at Michelson.

"We're set back at least five years, Mike! It's a hellish thing! But who could have anticipated a thing like that?"

"I guess nobody could."

"We're getting things under control, but it's hell down here! We don't know yet how many people have died."

"How could it be," Michelson said. "I've tried to figure out—"

Engstrand's voice was loud. It seemed to Mary that he was right there in the cabin with Michelson. "It's obvious what happened, Mike! Those first experimental rockets we sent up there. The damn Martians got hold of one of those chimps and worked on it. Sent it back and we didn't suspect the difference. They made it intelligent enough to plan and execute this whole thing! They must have put one of their own brains into it or something. Only a damn Martian would think of a thing like that!"

Michelson's head raised quickly. From the side, Mary could see his eyes suddenly widen. Then he wiped his hand across his lips.

The hand trembled. "Of course," he whispered then. "But who could ever have suspected it?"

"That's the only explanation," Engstrand said. "We've got to have that chimp alive! We can learn plenty from it. We'll cut in there and put that brain under observation . . ."

"I'll do what I can, if Mary shows up here," Michelson said. "But those Guards should get here!"

"They will, Mike! They will! They're on their way."

Mary dug her fingers into the floor. She moved slightly, and one hand fell with a slight thud. Michelson looked down. He kept on staring. His lips moved without saying anything a few times. Then he stammered. "Engstrand—she's here!"

"What? What?"

"She's here—here on the floor. She just—just crawled in through the door!"

"Don't kill her! Get a hypo or something—"

Michelson slowly stood up. "There's no danger," he finally said, still looking down at her. "She's wounded all right. She looks almost dead now."

"Don't let her die!" Engstrand's voice filled the room. "You've got to keep her alive!"

"All right, I'll do what I can," Michelson said. "You'd better come up now. Bring the medics. We may have to work on her fast."

"I will. I'm on my way!"

SHE wanted to say no. She wanted to scream out no and tell him it was all wrong. If the Martians had given her the ability to speak, she could have explained everything long before this, and they could have helped her, and none of this would have happened. She could explain how she was forced to kill and destroy.

Michelson backed away from her, haltingly, then ran into the lab. He came back out and knelt down. He had a long hypodermic needle. The needle came down. It looked bigger and bigger.

She had thought maybe he would understand. But he didn't. He couldn't. Nobody could.

A few words could have made all the difference. But she could not speak.

What she wanted to explain most of all was that it was no kind of Martian intelligence that had been given to her. The Martians had no familiar kind of intelligence. They had worked on her, developed her

own brain to its capacity. If they only knew that here it would be so different. I'm more like you, she wanted to explain, more like you than you could possibly guess. She could say nothing.

She could only whimper as the needle went in. Dimly, she saw the table wheeled out, the shiny familiar gleam of the instruments, the septic chrome containers and the rising cleansing waves of steam.

She felt herself being lifted to the table. The wheels turned inexorably under her. The ceiling swam in a blur above her. The gray aging tired face bent over her. She could roll her eyes back and see the dark mouth of the laboratory door opening wider and wider as she was wheeled toward it, through it—

You said you loved me, she thought, as he bent over her and she could hear the clinking of glass. But you never did because if you did you would understand, even though I cannot speak.

She closed her eyes. Around her were the familiar smells, the antiseptic, the chemicals, the odor of animals waiting to die or be experimented on in their cages. She could hear the chattering of the monkeys, the coughing of dogs, the squealing of rats. She could remember how the placid guinea pigs would be seeking one another's warmth in the corner of a cage.

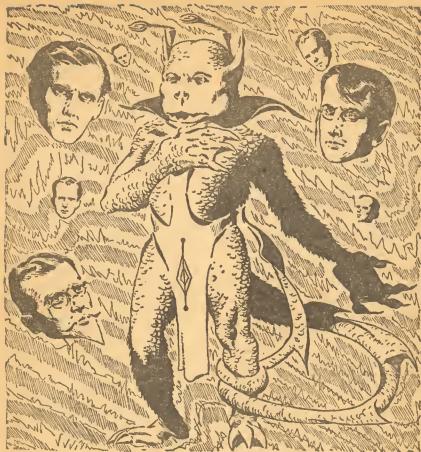
It was all beginning again, and there would never never, she knew, be an ending to it.

She clutched at his hand, squeezed it between her hands and pressed it against her cheek.

"Daddy," the thought whispered unheard, "Daddy Mike—"



Illustration by Chas. Hornstein



THE OGRE TEST

By ROBERT SHECKLEY

Which insidious monster was telling the truth? Almooroa, the fur-skinned giant, or Irik, the long-tailed runt? Earth's best brains futilely sought the answer as the proclaimed Day of Doom approached.

GEORGE HENDRICKS stood in the middle of his furnished room at twelve o'clock midnight, trying to decide whether he wanted to take a shower

first or fry an egg. He was very hungry; but also, he was quite grimy. It was a tough decision. Hendricks was on the verge of flipping a coin when the telephone rang.

He picked it up on the first ring, hoping it might be good news for a change. But of course it wasn't.

"Hendricks? Could you come right over?" Professor Jenkins asked him. "We've run into some difficulty."

"What sort of difficulty?" Hendricks asked, lighting a cigarette one-handed. He had been working with Jenkins on the big project all week, and everything had been going smoothly.

"You'd better come right over," Jenkins said, in a quiet, dead voice one might use to announce the end of the world. Hendricks didn't argue. Jenkins, aside from being a top cultural anthropologist, was head of the project.

Hendricks slipped on a topcoat and hurried out.

Seated in a taxi, he tried to think what difficulty could have come up. The battle date might have been advanced, of course. They had been working on a tight schedule since Almooroa had landed. If the alien had miscalculated by a day or two—

The taxi stopped in front of the Ellinson Foundation.

Hendricks paid, and showed the door guard his credentials.

Inside, there was an unusual amount of movement for twelve-thirty, even with the battle date only three days off. He asked another guard where he could find Professor Jenkins.

"He's probably up there in Room 2112 with that alien fellow," the guard said in a bored voice, as though extraterrestrial visitors were an everyday occurrence.

Hendricks hurried upstairs. In front of 2112 another guard looked at his papers and let him in.

"Hello, Hendricks," Almooroa said. He was sitting in a reinforced chair, browsing through a magazine. Even sitting down he was immense. Now he stood up to his full height of seven feet six inches and clapped his elbows together ceremonially.

"I have heard many people running in the corridors," he said in almost perfect English. "Is anything wrong?"

"Just what I want to find out," Hendricks said. "Have you seen Professor Jenkins?"

"I have not seen him for almost eight hours," Almooroa said. He was quite human

looking, aside from his pelt of dark brown fur and protruding sabre-toothed jaw.

"I hope nothing is wrong," the extraterrestrial said, pacing nervously up and down the room. "Your ships must leave Earth inside of three days. You must join our fleet on time if you wish to have any chance against the Harrag Horde."

Hendricks nodded. As far as he knew the Earth fleet was ready.

The door opened and Jenkins hurried in. "So here you are," he said. "Would you come with me?"

Hendricks excused himself and followed. Jenkins rushed down the hall, his long, dark hair lifting from his scalp with every step.

"What's all this about?" Hendricks asked, trying to catch up.

"You'll see." He opened a door at the end of the hall. Hendricks followed him in, and gulped.

All the scientists on the project were there, seated in a semicircle. In the middle of that circle was a being about four feet tall. His skin was a scaly green-gray, and he had a long barbed tail. He was roughly human looking, except for the antennae behind each ear.

Another extraterrestrial!

"I think we're all here now," Jenkins said, in his tired voice. "This gentleman is called Irik. He landed on Earth a few hours ago, and was rushed here by the UN police. Tell them, Irik."

THE alien twitched his antennae and said, "Gentlemen, I am very sorry our two cultures must meet this way. Unfortunately there is no time for the usual ceremonies attending a first contact. You are in terrible danger. I will be brief, since the time is so short."

Irik twisted his tail twice around his leg, and licked his lips. "I represent the Orged Civilization, an ancient confederacy of several hundred planetary systems. We are a voluntary organization formed in the interests of peace, trade and cultural diffusion.

"The Sleet Pack, our nearest neighbors, sprang from savagery to superficial technological civilization in a few hundred years—"

Hendricks looked around. Jenkins, with

a barely perceptible shake of his head, cautioned him to be silent.

"As this horde swarmed into the periphery of our civilization we have been forced to fight. The war has been raging for almost a hundred years now, and the front has shifted considerably. Your planet lies in the present invasion route. Your planet is the next they will attack."

The alien looked around to see how they were receiving the news. He seemed baffled by their apparent calm.

"Perhaps you don't believe me," he said. "Well, the Orged Civilization cannot undertake the defense of your planet alone, much as we would like to. The better strategy would be for us to retreat, leaving your planet to the Pack, and regroup farther in our own territory. But we feel a moral obligation toward all intelligent life.

"Accordingly, we offer you a choice. You may, if you wish, join us. With your people and your resources actively on our side, we will undertake the joint defense of this planet.

"To this purpose I have brought several hundred of our older ships on slave circuit. If you are joining us, it must be at once, for the Pack will swarm into your system in about three of your days."

Hendricks was silent for a moment, trying to digest what the alien had said. It wasn't too hard to grasp, though, for it was almost exactly what Almooroa had told them.

"What do these barbarians look like?" Jenkins asked.

"They are tall, almost twice the size of myself," Irik answered. "And they have ugly brown fur and a tremendous jaw."

Just like Almooroa.

Almooroa had mentioned that the barbarians of the Harrag Horde were little monsters, not more than four feet high, thickset, with green-gray scaly hides, tail and antennae.

Just like the newest arrival.

The question is, Hendricks thought, which is telling the truth?

It was a very good question.

"If you will wait," Jenkins said, "I wish to talk with my colleagues."

Irik swung his tail over his head in assent, and the scientists filed out.

ALMOOROA had landed first, with substantially the same story as Irik. He said that he was a representative of the old, peaceful Malig Civilization, now engaged in a death struggle with a cruel barbarian horde. He, too, said that Earth was in the invasion path.

He had brought ships, with a faster-than-light drive that would keep the physical sciences happy for fifty years.

Naturally, Earth couldn't afford to doubt his word. If anyone was going to attack Earth, her people wanted a fighting chance. If that chance could be obtained by joining the Malig Civilization, that's what Earth was going to do.

But another extraterrestrial, also bringing ships, telling the same story. . . .

Earth couldn't afford to doubt him, either.

Someone was going to attack Earth. But which one?

"This is an impossible situation," Carnier muttered, making a bridge of his pudgy fingers and staring at them moodily. "With less than three days to go. . . . Why would the barbarians ask us for aid?"

"That's pretty obvious," Hendricks said. "They need allies. A hundred years of war must have cut pretty deeply into the manpower on both sides. If the barbarians can trick us into helping them it might swing the entire war."

"And naturally," Jenkins said, "they would represent themselves as a peace loving union. No one loves a conqueror except his own people. This is the sort of thing a clever barbarian leader would think of."

"All we have to do," Hendricks said, "is find which is the genuine agent of civilization."

"Well, perhaps it won't be too difficult," Tomlinson said. "I suggest that we confront each with the other. Perhaps one will break down."

The rest of the group agreed, and Irik was led to Almooroa's room.

THERE was a moment of profound silence as the two aliens looked at each other. Then Almooroa leaped to his feet, upsetting his chair.

"The Horde is cleverer than I had sup-

posed," he said bitterly. "I suppose he has asked for aid against us?"

"He says he's the representative of the Orged Civilization," Jenkins said.

"There is no such thing!" Almooroa shouted. "These barbarians will try any lies, any trickery. Just look at him! Green-gray hide, barbed tail and all! Exactly as I told you!"

"So he got here first," Irik said, his tail swinging ominously. "I daresay you have discovered by now how shaky his pretensions to civilization are?"

"Just a minute," Tomlinson said, a light perspiration breaking out on his narrow, dark face. "You both insist that you represent a peace loving, interstellar civilization?"

Almooroa nodded. Irik swung his tail over his head.

"And each accuses the other of being the barbarian?"

"Yes!"

"Of course!"

There was a moment of silence as the scientists looked tragically and bitterly at each other.

"I warn you," Almooroa said. "The Horde will sweep through in three days time. We cannot help you if your fleets are not joined to ours by then."

"Remember," Irik said sadly, "if you join the barbarians, no power of ours can save you. The Pack will occupy your planet as soon as you have helped push us back."

"Just a moment," Jenkins said firmly. "I think you can both understand our predicament. Each of you have come with aid, representing a different Civilization. We can only accept the help of one. We cannot afford to make any mistake. But how can we know? Can either of you offer any proof?"

"Proof?" Almooroa roared. "Just look at him!"

Irik smiled sadly and his antennae turned toward each other in an incomprehensible gesture.

"I can only hope you will recognize what is obvious," he said.

"Now then," Jenkins said later, when they had returned Irik to his room, "we represent a gathering of anthropologists,

sociologists, biologists, psychologists. Certainly there are some tests we can devise to determine which alien is the barbarian?"

"Of course!" Tomlinson said. "After all, one has been brought up in a peace loving democracy, where culture and trade are sovereign. The other is from a people proficient only in the art of war. By questioning both closely, we should be able to determine which comes from where."

"The barbarian," Carnier said slowly, "should have little knowledge of the inner workings of an ancient civilization. It's something he wouldn't want to know."

Hendricks nodded, but felt uneasy. He hoped it would be as easy as that.

"We'll have to hurry," Jenkins said. "It is now almost two A.M. We have all day tomorrow, and about half of the day after. Then the UN must have a definite answer. Suppose you divide yourselves into two teams, and start the interrogation. I'm going to call the UN."

He walked slowly out of the room.

Irik was seated comfortably on an overstuffed couch, looking out the window at the city lights.

"Could you tell us," Hendricks asked, "how the Orged Civilization is governed? The division of power?"

"Certainly," Irik said promptly. "The Civilization is in the form of a loose confederacy. We are held together by mutual trade interests and a like culture."

"Of course," Hendricks said sourly. He could have guessed that much himself. "But I mean the actual, detailed chains of command."

"Well," Irik said, "I confess I'm rather shaky on that sort of thing. I was born on a frontier planet, you see, and I went into the Army at an early age."

Tomlinson was jotting down notes in his tiny, precise script. "Could you tell us the principal movements in philosophy extant in the Civilization?"

"How's that?" Irik asked.

"What do your people believe?" Hendricks said.

"Oh, let me see," Irik said, his tail flicking nervously around the rungs of his chair. "We believe strongly in the idea of doing to others what you'd like to have done to

yourself. It's quite a basic idea with us."

For fifteen minutes he expostulated on the Golden Rule.

"Yes, I know," Tomlinson said impatiently. "But be more specific. I mean, your civilization must have a number of highly structured theories concerning the origin of the universe, the existence of a supreme being, the nature of life, and so forth."

"Sure we do," Irik said. "We've got all those. But I've been in the army all my life." He laughed nervously. "I mean, everyone's always talking about the universe and philosophy, and stuff, but I was taught how to lead men and fight the Pack. That's a full time job in itself. After all, we are at war."

"You seem a funny choice for a mission like this," Hendricks said.

"I was a logical choice. This isn't a cultural mission. It's a matter of life and death. Of course a soldier would be sent."

The questioning went on for three hours more. Irik couldn't answer any detailed questions about the economic setup of the Orged Civilization, its philosophy, psychology, laws, or anything else.

He maintained that they had those things, in great abundance, and everyone was very happy with them. He just didn't happen to know much about them.

TOMLINSON and Hendricks went to see how the other group had made out. They found Carnier jotting down comments on his notes in a vacant room.

"How did it go?" Tomlinson asked.

"Not well at all," Carnier admitted, wearily removing his glasses. "Almoora showed no detailed knowledge at all. Of course, his story of being raised on an expedition to the interior of the galaxy could be true, and would account for it. After he got back he went into the Army. What did Irik say?"

Tomlinson told him.

"That's bad," Carnier said, putting his glasses back on and yawning. He rubbed his broad cheek. "I need a shave."

"Either story could be true," Hendricks pointed out. "After all, you couldn't expect the average Army sergeant on Earth to talk fluently about existentialism and the Greek Drama."

"It's all damnably confusing," Tomlinson said, sitting down heavily.

Hendricks lighted a cigarette, and remembered that he hadn't had any sleep for almost forty-five hours.

Jenkins came in, unwrapping a bar of chocolate. "The UN is equipping both fleets," he said. "They expect a definite and final answer the day after tomorrow. I mean the day after today. Would anyone care for some chocolate?"

"No thank you," Tomlinson said. "Would they care to come in and figure it out for themselves?"

"That's our job," Jenkins said. "And if we can't, I don't know who can." He looked at his watch. "Getting early," he said. "You'd better all eat and catch a nap."

Hendricks pulled himself to his feet and went down to the cafeteria. He wolfed down three hamburgers, then found a row of vacant cots that the Army had set up.

He was asleep almost before he lay down.

Tomlinson shook him awake at noon. Hendricks sat up, red-eyed, aware that tomorrow was the last day.

"Morgan found that Almoora doesn't use a bed," Tomlinson said. "Sleeps on the floor. Primitive indifference to comfort, would you say?"

"Maybe," Hendricks said, trying to ease a crink in his neck. "How does Irik sleep?"

"I don't know," Tomlinson said. "I think Carnier was checking that."

Hendricks wiped his eyes and followed Tomlinson down the hall. In a large, empty room three men were wheeling in a lie detector. Carnier was supervising its installation.

"Did you hear?" Carnier asked them. "Irik sleeps hanging by his tail from the ceiling fixture." He beamed at them. "I believe that's a pretty good indication of barbarism."

Hendricks left the two men arguing which form of sleeping was most indicative of what, and went to find Jenkins.

The cultural anthropologist was reading through a four inch pile of notes. Beside him, a coffee pot was chugging merrily on a little burner.

"I hope that the lie detector may show something," Jenkins said. "But I doubt it. Have some coffee. Do you have any ideas?"

"Not one," Hendricks said. "I'm still trying to wake up."

"The trouble is," Jenkins said, "how can we judge an entire culture by one representative? Could the human race be judged on that basis? Sorry, I don't seem to have any sugar."

"Never use it," Hendricks said. "Have you any ideas?"

"A few dismal ones," Jenkins said. "The UN is needling me already for a decision. They don't like to think about the possibility of a mistake."

"I don't either," Hendricks said, feeling himself come alive as the steaming coffee filled him.

"I want to run a few tests in esthetic appreciation," Jenkins said. "We just might find a point of departure there."

He stood up and lifted his briefcase. "Coming?"

Hendricks gulped the rest of his coffee and followed.

"I'D LIKE your opinion on this," Jenkins said to Almooroa in a carefully casual voice. He opened his briefcase and pulled out a book.

"There was blood on the moon that night," he read, with a complete lack of expression, "as Bat Masterson, spurs jingling, hard heeled his way into Kelley's Saloon. Hands barely brushing the black butts of his guns, he swept two loungers from his path as he strode to the bar."

"That's very nice," Almooroa said, watching Jenkins' face carefully. He glanced at Hendricks, then said, "Very nice indeed."

"How about this?" Jenkins asked. He took another book from his briefcase and read, with the same lack of expression, a Shakespearean sonnet.

"That's very nice also," Almooroa said, still glancing from one face to the other. "I can see that you are a cultured people."

"Which do you like better?"

"Well, that's difficult to say," Almooroa said, after a few moments of thought. "The one has a better feeling of action, I would say. But the other was certainly more rhythmic. I liked them both."

"How about this?" Jenkins asked. He showed Almooroa a fine reproduction of the Mona Lisa.

"Very pretty," Almooroa said cautiously.

"And this?" He held up a third grade crayon drawing.

"That has nice color," Almooroa said.

In music Almooroa liked Bach, Chinese music, and Cole Porter, as well as a tuneless little ditty Hendricks improvised on the spur of the moment.

"I really don't know much about the arts, though," he reminded them. "After all, I'm a soldier."

Outside Almooroa's room, Hendricks looked at Jenkins and raised an eyebrow. "He seems to have little grasp of the idea of criticism," he said. Hendricks could feel the scales in his mind starting to tip.

"Remember, though," Jenkins said, "we're dealing in *our* esthetics. His own might be entirely different. It is very possible that he has no base to form his judgments on. What a people like and don't like, their response to art objects, their degree of interest, their critical faculties, all are dependent on their nervous systems, their environment, and a whole host of *imponderables*."

Hendricks nodded dubiously. "But you would think that a representative of the Malig Civilization would have *something* definite to say."

"Perhaps we'll have better luck with Irik," Jenkins said.

IRIK maintained that the Shakespearean sonnet was meaningless. The cowboy selection was vile. The Mona Lisa was ugly, he insisted, and the third grade drawing wasn't much better. Bach, Chinese music, Cole Porter and Hendricks' humming all sounded like so much noise in his ears.

"When you come in contact with the Orged Civilization," he said, "you'll see what the Arts really are." He scratched his forehead with his tail.

"Of course," he said, "you must remember that I am a rude, untutored soldier. I would naturally tend to deprecate your arts."

Which didn't prove anything, either.

"The trouble is," Jenkins told Hendricks later, "a negative finding means nothing. Either of them could be expressing an honest opinion. We must find some better evidence."

"Perhaps some of the others have found something," Hendricks said.

"We'll see," Jenkins said. "We'll hold a conference after supper."

At the conference, a vast amount of data was presented. Potentially, there were some damning things to be said for either alien. But it was impossible to prove conclusively the case for one or the other.

"The stumbling block," Jenkins said, "is our lack of an absolute scale on which to judge 'barbarianism' and 'civilization.' We have no referents for those labels, no referents which would be positively, unmistakably valid."

"We have our own standards," Tomlinson said. "By extrapolation—"

"By extrapolation they're still our standards," Jenkins said. "The real Civilization might have standards incomprehensible to us."

"Granted," Carnier said. "We still must use some sort of a yardstick."

"I know," Jenkins sighed. "But what yardstick? Suppose we proved one was 'civilized' by our standards. We could still be wrong in terms of his own standards."

"If we could only devise a foolproof test," Hendricks said dreamily.

"Don't wait for it," Jenkins said. "It's a purely fictional supposition. I suppose most of you are waiting to find one thing that will prove the issue. You're waiting for one of the aliens to make a simple but revealing error, which will instantly reveal his barbarity. Things don't happen that way in real life, gentlemen."

Hendricks tried to suppress a smile. He had been looking for just that.

"The trouble with the 'revealing error' theory," Jenkins went on, "is the possibility that we might condemn an entire race because one of its inhabitants lacks verbal skill."

"But where does that leave us?" Tomlinson asked.

Jenkins shrugged his shoulders. "All the tests run so far are being mimeographed," he said. "I want each of you to read a copy thoroughly, and try to form some sort of working hypothesis. By noon tomorrow we'll have to have our decision."

Hendricks rubbed his stiff neck. That left them about fifteen or so hours. A night

and half a day, before Earth had to cast the dice.

"You are free to run any tests you like," Jenkins said. "Good luck."

Hendricks glanced at his watch. It was eight-thirty.

WITH the mimeographed notes tucked under his arm, Hendricks found a vacant room and sat down to study.

Biology was first. According to the report, Almoora showed signs of being a more highly evolved being. He had roughly the same nervous system as a human, but he was lacking an appendix. His digestive tract was simplified, and he had an auxiliary heart.

But, Biology pointed out, he was strictly carnivorous, and a daytime sleeper.

Signs of civilization?

Irik had large claws and an armored hide, a prehensile tail and antennae. Although bipedal, Biology doubted that he sprang from the same root as man. They didn't have enough evidence to speculate on his origin, but pointed out his reptilian appearance.

Irik also showed a slightly more convoluted brain, and a more complex nervous system.

Biology hastened to say, though, that it was impossible to generalize about a race from a single brain. It could be a case of individual differences.

Were there any signs of civilization there, Hendricks asked himself?

Psychology was incomplete, having no standard to base its findings on. The lie detector results were meaningless.

Physiology pointed out Almoora's slightly faster reaction time, which might be interpreted as an instinctive, defensive reflex, or as a highly trained civilized response, depending upon whose theory you were following.

According to Physical Anthropology, Irik had evolved on a hot world, while Almoora was a cold world inhabitant. Interpret any way you like.

After several hours, facts and figures were spinning through Hendricks' head. He began to sense a slight leaning toward Irik.

But introspecting, he discovered that

he was associating great size with barbarianism, smaller size with civilization.

Then the scales in his mind shifted toward Almooroa. But he found that he was considering reptilism as synonymous with barbarianism.

He pushed the papers away. Was it possible to be objective in a matter of this importance?

Hendricks spent the rest of the night trying to sort out and discard his personal biases, as opposed to his considered judgments. Sternly he reminded himself that civilization has nothing to do with appearance. A civilized race, he told himself, could be eighteen feet tall, speak with a lisp and drool incessantly. While a clever, handsome, cleanly race would be complete and utter savages.

By morning, he was ready to give up. After sorting his prejudices, he had nothing left.

"**WE HAVE** time for one more test, gentlemen," Jenkins said, when they all met in mid-morning. "Then we will have to decide, once and irrevocably. Mr. Tomlinson and Mr. Carnier have devised this, and I hope it will prove something."

They followed Jenkins into a room adjoining Almooroa's. It had been panelled with one-way glass, so they could see without being seen.

A volunteer walked into Almooroa's room. He looked at the alien scornfully, then said, "O.K., boy. Are you all set?"

"Set for what?" Almooroa asked, getting to his feet.

"Set to say your prayers, you damned savage. We have conclusive proof that you are a representative of the Sleeret Pack."

Almooroa's reaction was little short of instantaneous. He bellowed with rage, and plucked the man off the ground as though he were a feather. The volunteer shrieked as Almooroa raised him over his head.

In mid-air, Almooroa checked himself. He put the man carefully on his feet.

"I'm sorry," he said. "We soldiers have quick tempers, you know. That was quite foolish of me."

The volunteer backed away, his face ashen.

"I won't harm you," Almooroa said.

"After all, I am a civilized being, even if I do have a quick temper. If your people choose to make a mistake like this, there's nothing I can do about it." He sat down again in his reinforced chair.

"I only hope that your children forgive you for what you are going to do."

"You see?" Carnier said, nudging Hendricks. "Primitive, poorly concealed emotions. He gave himself away."

"If he *were* civilized," Hendricks said, "he might have the same reaction to our stupidity."

"Don't confuse things," Carnier said, with desperate certainty. "His reaction was that of a savage."

"Now we'll try the test on Irik," Jenkins said.

Although shaken, the same volunteer agreed to go in, in hopes of providing some sort of control factor.

"O.K., boy," he said to the scaly Irik. "Are you all set?"

"What do you mean, set?" Irik asked.

"Set to say your prayers, you damned savage," the man said, edging away from the barbed tail. "We have conclusive proof that you're a representative of the Harrag Horde."

Irik just stood for a moment, his antennae twitching. Then he turned and walked to the window, his tail coiled over his wrist.

"It's a pity," he said. "The barbarians will love this planet. Just remember—I tried to warn you."

"**AH!**" TOMLINSON cried, his thin face triumphant. "Now we're getting somewhere! Did you see it? The cunning with which he concealed his shock!"

"You think he's the barbarian?" Jenkins asked.

"Of course! His unconcern was obviously an act. How could anyone be that calm with the fate of his race hanging in the balance. It was the act of a clever, ruthless, amoral barbarian."

"I don't see it that way at all," Carnier said. "I thought he showed civilized control."

"Not at all," Tomlinson pointed out patiently. "Almooroa's honesty is made manifest by the fact that he couldn't conceal his emotion in a vital moment like that."

He's obviously a blunt, honest soldier."

"Gentlemen," Jenkins said, "we have only about an hour left. I suggest that we adjourn to the conference room, and come to a decision."

"Now then," Carnier said, once everyone was seated, "I have decided in favor of Irik, and I'd like to sum up the reasons why. First of all, I believe his control in the last test was a definite sign of culture. Savages don't hide their emotions that way."

"Didn't you ever hear of primitive stoicism?" Tomlinson muttered.

"Next," Carnier said, ignoring the interruption, "biology tells us that Irik has a more highly developed brain. This implies higher intelligence, which is a concomitant of civilization. Finally, his distaste for our arts was certainly a more sophisticated appraisal than Almooroa's guileful acceptance of everything."

"You're completely wrong," Tomlinson said, putting down his cigarette and getting to his feet. "I've already mentioned the honesty apparent in Almooroa's reaction to the last test. Think also of his control. He appraised the situation, and put the man down. Irik, you see, reacted exactly as he thought we wanted him to."

Hendricks listened, but didn't find anything to say. It seemed to him that none of the arguments were conclusive. Once again, it was a question of personal interpretation.

An officer in the uniform of the UN appeared in the door. "We must have the answer now, sir," he said to Jenkins.

"All right," Jenkins said. "Please wait outside." The officer closed the door behind him. "Now, gentlemen, the decision must be made."

All talking stopped, as suddenly as if it had been cut off by a knife.

"All right, those who feel that Irik is the barbarian. Raise your hands."

Several hands went up. Hendricks, after a moment's consideration, kept his down.

Jenkins counted the votes, and said, "Now those who feel that Almooroa is the barbarian."

Again he counted.

"You must all vote," Jenkins said. "Now, again. And please make up your minds one way or the other."

Now Hendricks was the only abstention,

aside from Jenkins himself. The vote was evenly divided, half for Almooroa, half for Irik.

"Who has not voted?" Jenkins asked.

"I didn't," Hendricks said.

"There is a deadlock. Please vote now."

"I can't," Hendricks said.

"You must. Whom do you favor?"

"I don't favor either of them," Hendricks said stubbornly. "There isn't enough positive evidence."

"You must vote."

"Do you want me to flip a coin?" Hendricks asked desperately.

"If you must," Jenkins told him. "*We must do something!*"

Sweat was pouring out of Hendricks' face, down his sides and back. A decision. He had to make a decision. All he had to do was name one, and the pressure was off him.

"I vote—against both of them," Hendricks said in a hoarse gasp. "Do any damn thing you like. That's all I have to say."

Jenkins stared hard at him, and for a moment Hendricks thought the rest of the scientists were going to mob him. He knew that he wasn't playing fair. They had staked their lives on a guess. Why hadn't he?

He realized that he was a coward in their eyes for not taking the last blind plunge.

"I understand how you feel," Jenkins said. "And I think you have given me the solution."

The officer scraped his feet like an impatient stallion.

"Mr. Hendricks," Jenkins said, "you will take Irik in your custody and get him on board one of the ships. Stay with him. Have him give the flight commander the coordinates of his forces."

IT WAS Hendricks' first flight into space, but he was so tired, angry and afraid that the thrill didn't touch him. He delivered Irik to the ship's officers, and watched the entry port screw shut.

"Prepare for takeoff!" a loudspeaker blared, and a siren began to wail. Hendricks was shown a cot, and the ship's doctor filled him up with anti-acceleration serum.

Suddenly he knew—even without evidence—that Irik was the wrong choice. He

tried to climb out of the cot, but the giant hand of acceleration caught him, and he blacked out.

Hendricks came to, feeling as though a herd of elephants had stampeded across his stomach, leaving their muddy footprints in his mouth. He grabbed the side of the cot and pulled himself upright.

"Mr. Hendricks?" an officer said, helping him to his feet. "Professor Jenkins is on the radio. He wants to talk to you."

Hendricks staggered to the control room, hoping he still had time to tell Jenkins that he was wrong. The officer shoved a microphone in front of him.

"Hello, Hendricks?" Jenkins voice boomed out, surprisingly cheerful. "How do you feel?"

"Great. Listen, Irik is the wrong one. He's a barbarian. I don't have any proof, but I'm positive—"

"I know," Jenkins said. "Now listen. At my suggestion the fleet is moving to a point between the coordinates given by each. That should put us in broadcasting range. I want you to bring Irik into the control room. Tell him to broadcast his people the following message:—If there is any attempt to move into our solar system, the full force of this fleet will be thrown against the transgressor."

"Then Irik is from the Horde!"

"That's right."

"But are we cooperating with Almooroa's people?"

"No," Jenkins said. "I have Almooroa on my ship. He's going to send the same message to his people."

Hendricks just stared at the microphone.

"I want to thank you," Jenkins said. "If you had voted one way or the other, we would probably have chosen between them. It would have been easier for you to vote. But the fact that you couldn't made me reconsider the evidence."

"Consider. Neither of them knew anything about a galactic civilization. A man who lived in such a civilization, even on its frontiers, would know some details about its traditions, laws, philosophy. Especially a man picked as a representative of that civilization."

"Neither of them showed any critical faculty on any terms. Both showed numerous tendencies which could be construed as barbaric. To accept one as civilized, we would have to accept the other. There just wasn't that much difference between them."

"I think I see the conclusion," Hendricks said. "Both are barbarians, and representatives of different barbarian hordes. Of course! But wait a moment. We'll still be attacked—"

"I don't think so," Jenkins said. "Since both came to us for aid, I think we can assume that they are fairly evenly balanced in strength. They are fighting a life and death struggle, and drawing in as many allies as they can. Why should they fight us? Neither wants more enemies."

Hendricks could feel the whole thing take shape in his mind. But there was still something that Jenkins hadn't thought of.

"Understand?" Jenkins went on. "If one attacks us, we throw everything we have against him, which might provide the factor necessary for victory for the other. All an aggressor will get out of us is the possibility of a major defeat."

"All right," Hendricks said. "For now. But the battle front will change. One will be pushed back, and then the other will be able to take over our system."

"We will have to prepare for that day," Jenkins said. "We will copy the designs of these ships and build more. We will probably improve on them, because I think we are much cleverer than they."

"Beware of pride," Hendricks murmured.

"I still think so. And I think we will send out our own representatives. There must be more inhabited planets in this region of space. Planets where the inhabitants will want to unite with us against both of these hordes."

Hendricks raised his head, and for the first time looked out on space. Stars, stars, an endless confusion of them as far as he could see.

It made him feel good.

"Do you know," he said to Jenkins, "I think it entirely possible that *we* are going to become that civilization they were talking about."

Fingers to hold

*Who wants to walk alone when Daddy's hand is there to hold?
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THE LAST MONSTER

By JAMES McKIMMEY, Jr

For two long, dreary years handsome Webster Brown hadn't laid eyes on the female form. When at last destiny sent him a blonde bomb-shell, the poor guy went all to creases.

WHEN he saw the rocket settle and the man appear, then the woman, he ran the palms of his hands lightly over his jacket, the way a man will perform a simple, nearly oblivious motion when he is touched by the first impact of shock. He felt his teeth tighten together and he drew in his breath with a faint hiss. Webster Brown had not seen a human being for more than two years.

He moved quickly then, behind a pale yellowish plant, and he peered at the two figures, as though if he showed himself to them, they might suddenly disappear, leaving the planet to its dead, ugly aloneness and Webster Brown again.

But it was the woman, not the man, that he watched intently. And when she turned so that he could see her face, his breath no longer hissed, but seemed to stop against his gritting teeth.

She was fair, with the kind of skin that looked like olive-tinted satin. Her hair, deep gold against her skin, shone like poured honey against the sun. Webster Brown extended a hand and clutched his fingers about the stem of the yellowish plant. "Don't disappear, please," he prayed. "Please, please don't disappear!"

Between Brown and the two figures was a stretch of typical terrain. Gray sand and ugly swollen rocks, used up a great part of the surface. And scattered about were the thin, snaking vines that were the color of ripe bruised grapes, the large but wilting flowers in their hues of flat brown and chartreuse, and the squat scrub trees with their trunks knotted and split and warped like misshapen human limbs.

Brown gazed over all of this and licked his lips as the woman stretched and shook her honey hair.

The man, a heavy, barrel-chested figure with a sharp angular face, placed his hands above his eyes and searched the expanse around his rocket.

Slowly, Brown stood up, touching his freshly pressed jacket, his cheeks, his hair; then he began to walk toward the visitors of his planet.

He kept his fists tight at his sides, still breathing carefully, praying in his brain that this was not a trick of his senses. But when he reached them he could see that they were human and real and that they had not disappeared at all.

"Hello, there," he said foolishly.

The man nodded faintly, his eyes intent and thin, one hand resting against the butt of a revolver strapped to his heavy waist.

Brown glanced shyly at the woman for a moment, and he found that this proximity to her made his heart pound so heavily that he was certain he could neither breathe nor speak. He forced his eyes to look back to the man, and he found his voice, at last. "Welcome to Brown's planet," he said, and he was surprised that his voice did not crack or fuzz, but instead came ringing out fairly clearly.

"Who are you?" the man said, and his voice was like a rake going through cinders.

"Webster Brown," he said, rather proudly. "And I am happy to see you." He wanted to let his glance drift back to the woman, but he kept his eyes upon the man, showing a smile.

"Webster Brown," the woman repeated softly, and Brown could feel her eyes searching him. He wanted to raise his hands again, to his face and hair, but he didn't. Instead he waited for the man to speak.

"What are you doing on this rotten,



Illustration by Joseph Eberle

ugly globe?" the man asked, his fingers still touching the pistol.

"I maintain this emergency post," Brown said, knowing his teeth were shining brightly in the sun. He had practiced his voice, watched his smile and the crinkling about his eyes, so many times in front of a mirror—yet now, when he could use these things, he was afraid he might cry instead, or yell, or laugh, until he couldn't stop laughing.

"A beautiful post," the man said sarcastically, looking about.

"Beautiful," the woman breathed, still watching Brown.

"It isn't the prettiest planet in the universe," Brown apologized. "But—it's home."

"For you, brother," said the man. "Not for me or my wife."

"No, sir," Brown agreed.

"Could you take a look at the ship?" the man said, jerking his thumb. "I don't want to waste any time here. It's the oxygen control. If you could find out what our trouble is, I'd be . . ."

"Oh, yes!" Brown exploded. "Yes, indeed! But wouldn't you like to wait a bit in my quarters? Very nice, really. Some rest, perhaps, might be just the thing."

"Charles?" the woman pleaded.

"All right, all right," the man said. "But I want to get out of here the first possible chance." He drew a wallet out of his jacket. "I'll make it good, of course, Brown. Very good."

"No, no," Brown said quickly, holding out the flat of his hand. "My pleasure, really. I've been here over two years, you see. Alone. It's such a real pleasure having you stop this way. I . . ." He felt the joy building inside of him and he was afraid if he kept talking he couldn't stop. He closed his lips, feeling them trembling a little, and he knew his eyes were misting with emotion.

"Could you show us your quarters, Mr. Brown?" the woman asked, and the sound of her voice made Brown certain that he could not move without losing his balance.

He strained to maintain his composure and said, finally, "Please, step this way."

"You lead, Mr. Brown," the woman said, her eyes bright and smiling.

Brown's head bobbed, and he turned

around, thanking heaven that he did not blush idiotically.

He led the way over the sickening maize of dull color and twisted growth. And in the distance from the rocket to his dome-roofed shelter, he was blind to the tree blisters and the leaf ruptures and all of the rest of the deformities that had so bitten at his sensibilities over the past years.

The man and woman, however, showed by their faces, their eyes, that the abominable qualities of the planet had touched their senses. "Stinking, sickening place!" the man said, motioning. The woman simply shook her head, as though to clear away the ugliness.

"You grow used to it," Brown said. "Somewhat."

The man frowned and wiped his hands against his trousers, as though to clean away any of the filthiness that his eyes might have seen. They stepped into the clean neatness of Brown's home beneath the clear dome.

"Coffee? Tea? Bourbon?" Brown asked, trying to keep their attention within the clean confines of his dome.

"Bourbon," said the man.

"Same," said the woman, smiling, and Brown's hands scurried into a cabinet where he had saved a dusty bottle.

When the glasses had been poured Brown raised his own glass and said, "To health and luck." He was afraid if he didn't hold tightly to the glass it might fly across the room. My cup, he thought, looking down and at the same time seeing the woman out of the corners of his eyes, it runneth over.

"To simply getting the hell out of here," the man said.

They drank, and then Brown sat down on the edge of one of the lounge chairs, perching like a bird ready to fly into the air. His eyes were wide, and he had great trouble not standing up and shouting with his happiness.

"You've come to see me," he said without thinking.

"We've come to repair the damned oxygen control," the man corrected. "And I wonder if you couldn't get at it pretty quick."

"Yes," Brown said. "Surely!"

"Oh, but he hasn't seen anyone in such a long time, Charles," the woman said, and Brown wondered incredulously if she weren't flirting with him.

He smiled shyly and looked at the floor.

The man shook his glass and drained the rest of his drink.

"Another?" Brown said, popping up.

"Yes, all right," the man said. "I think it might be the tank release," he added, as Brown filled his glass. "You might look at that first."

"Yes, sir," Brown said, sitting down again. "I'll surely do that."

"Tell me, Mr. Brown," the woman said.

"What's the reason for the way everything here is so . . . so . . ."

"Ugly?" Brown finished frankly.

The woman nodded.

"Nobody really knows, I guess," he said.

"Atmosphere, possibly. Certain ingredients in the soil, perhaps. Everything combined."

"It doesn't appear to have affected you," the woman stated, appreciatively, and now Brown was certain that her eyes were flirting with him.

He held his fingers around the glass, not daring to look at her. He looked instead to the large mirror across the room, where he could see his well-shaped nose and square handsome chin and the thick, neatly combed black hair. He let his teeth show through his smile and they were very white and perfect.

"You're being very kind," he said at last, and then he stopped short the rest of what he was going to say because of the darkening look on the man's face.

"Why is it, that it hasn't effected you, Brown?" the man said, his eyes narrow and examining.

"Well," Brown said, almost with apology that he did not offer a very ugly sight, "it would, in time. Not the plastics here in the dome, of course, or that sort of thing. They wouldn't be affected. But living cells appear to mutate—in certain time, that is," he added quickly, seeing the sudden alarm on the faces of the couple. "Nothing for you to fear, at all." He tried to put confidence into what he was saying.

The man was wiping his hands along his trousers again, and he said, "How much time, Brown?"

"Oh. Three years, anyway. That's why I'll be out of here in a couple of months, you see. I can only remain here so long, and then I'm replaced. This hasn't been such a long stay, altogether. The months go by faster than you think. Why . . ."

"The rocket?" the man interrupted. "I'd like to get out of here, Brown."

"Oh, yes!" Brown said, rising.

"I think you're being rude, Charles," the woman said.

The man didn't answer, and Brown noticed that much of the ugliness of the planet seemed to be reflected in the man's face. The changes of the planet, he thought, wouldn't alter the man's appearance a great deal, no matter how long he stayed. But the woman. . . .

"I'll look at that tank release!" Brown promised emphatically, and he got his tool kit from the back of the shelter and left the man and the woman inside the dome.

HE EXPLORED the lines running out from the oxygen tubes. He peered here, there, tapped this, twisted that. Light faded out of the sky, and when he was done, he said, "Well," grinning, and then he hurried back to shelter dome.

"Not good," he announced to the man.

"No?" said the man.

Brown shook his head.

"Oh, dear," the woman said, leaning back and watching Brown. "We'll have to stay here now, until it's fixed, won't we?"

"I can make you comfortable," Brown said quickly.

"I'm sure of it," the woman said.

Brown served his most precious wine that evening and the special foods placed away for just such an opportunity as this.

"This is a sweet damned note," growled the man, helping himself to Brown's good bourbon.

"Not so bad, really," his wife said, her lashes fluttering. "Since Mr. Brown is here. Think, dear, how it would be if Mr. Brown weren't here."

"I am," the man said, watching the way she was looking at Brown. "I am."

There was a rather steady silence then, and finally the woman stretched out on her chair. Brown caught his breath, looking. The man said, "Can you close off these

windows, Brown? That moon is out and it's so rotten ugly out there, it makes me sick."

"Oh," Brown said, jumping up. "Most assuredly." He drew the drapes by touching an automatic release.

"Thank you," said the man, tasting Brown's bourbon. "My God, what a bilious place!"

The man went to sleep eventually, the empty bottle clutched in his hands. Brown sat there, knowing the woman was watching him, and he felt his fingers fluttering together like frightened birds. She stood up, crossed the room, and stood in front of Brown. Her face was more soft and beautiful than anything Brown had ever seen in his life.

"He's a beast," she whispered, kneeling in front of him. "And a pig. I hate him."

"Oh?" said Brown, and he was not sure his voice came out at all this time.

The woman nodded and reached out to touch Brown's cheek. He scuttled backwards, as though her hand might have held deadly shock. His chair tumbled over, and he bounded to the opposite side of the room.

The woman's eyebrows arched. She straightened, frowning a little. "Haven't you been alone for two years? Am I not beautiful?"

"Oh, yes!" Brown breathed, tracing a hand over his handsome face.

"Well, then?"

Brown's eyes flickered toward the sleeping man.

"Oh," said the woman, laughing. "Well, let's step outside for a bit, shall we?"

Brown held his breath and then followed her, watching as she skipped ahead.

Over blood-red vines and sickly green leaves they dashed and cavorted, until the woman disappeared over a knoll. When Brown reached the peak of the knoll he found her a few yards away, stretching her arms to the silver moon, her hair loosened now, and the honey color of it falling over her shoulders. She was posing as if she knew quite well the impact of her loveliness amidst the terrible ugliness of her surroundings.

She turned and smiled invitingly to Brown.

Brown's fingernails caught against his palms, his breath stopped.

"Well?" she said, motioning her delicate hands above her head.

Brown whirled and dashed back to the sanctity of his shelter.

WHEN she had followed him back and found him curled tightly in his bunk she moved her face close to his and hissed, "It's him, isn't it? That's what it is?"

Brown's eyes were like those of a frightened puppy.

"I'll fix that," she said. "Listen, we can leave together. There'll be plenty of money. You won't have to wait here any longer, don't you understand?"

Brown blinked.

"Accidents happen," she said, her eyes darting to look at the sleeping man across the room.

Her fingers reached out to touch Brown's face again, and Brown slammed back against the far corner of his bunk.

"It is him?" she whispered, fingers poised.

Brown nodded the slightest bit.

She stood up and crossed the room, lightly, like a vision of one of Brown's dreams. She found the pistol that was strapped to the waist of the dark sprawled form, and Brown saw her raise it high in the air. The pistol swung down in a swift arc, there was a sound like the cracking of a melon, and the woman turned to face Brown, her sweet lips curving.

"Accidents happen," she repeated softly, and her husband rolled from his chair to the floor. The woman reached out and jerked the lever that moved the drapes. Moonlight came in, pouring over the quite dead face of the man.

"And that's that," she said to the staring sightless eyes. Then, suddenly, her body seemed to freeze.

Brown blinked and slowly stood up.

"What's the matter with him?" she said, gasping.

"Dead?" Brown said, helpfully.

"His mouth. What's the matter with his mouth?"

"I'll cover him up," Brown said politely. He took the cover from the table and started to drape the cloth gently over the

man's motionless form. The woman slapped it away.

"Look at his damned mouth!" the woman screamed, her eyes wide.

"Well," said Brown, standing there uselessly.

The woman spun about and ran to the mirror. She stroked trembling fingers over her lovely face, and all of a sudden she held her hands out in front of her, looking at one curling, gnarled finger. "My God," she said, crying quick tears.

Brown remained standing, quietly, over the lifeless man with the splitting mouth.

"You lied!" the woman yelled, staring at her ugly finger. "You said three years. You lied, you . . ." Her tears mixed with her words, and she was simply sobbing and holding the changing hand with her other still-good fingers.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Brown apologized. "I really am."

"My pretty, pretty face," the woman moaned. "My beautiful, beautiful body."

"It won't matter," Brown said softly. "To me."

"You animal," the woman sobbed.

Brown blinked and shifted his feet. "I was awfully lonely here. I didn't want to see you leave."

The woman crumpled to her knees, her frightened eyes still staring at the mutating finger. Another finger curled the slightest bit. She caught her scream between her teeth.

She rose quickly then, her eyes wild, and began to stumble across the room. "I'll fly the ship myself. I can do it. I'll get away . . ."

Brown's voice was very quiet and polite, almost rueful. "I let out all the oxygen. Oh, I am sorry. I really am. I shouldn't have done that, but I lied, too, about how the time went, you see. Not fast at all, but slow, and every day, every night, was a year. All alone, all alone, but now . . ."

The woman had sunk again to her knees, shaking her head back and forth. Another finger coiled and the woman moaned, her body swaying.

"I've really been here longer, you know," Brown said, the way a small boy might explain why he had done something wrong. "And there isn't anybody coming for me at all. I'm what you call an exile, because of some little thing I did once. And so you've killed someone now, too, and we'll be very happy together."

The woman raised her head and looked at him with delirious eyes.

Brown stood thinking a moment. "We should always be honest with each other, however," he stated at last. "That's the trick to any union."

"You're crazy," the woman sobbed.

"We won't have a wedding, of course, but we may as well say we're married, because we're alone here, you know. I'll look after you, don't worry. And don't you care about how you look. I won't mind."

The woman inched back against the door to the outside, and one of her pink ears flattened and turned red.

"But you have to be honest," Brown said, nodding positively. "You can't make these things work with deception. So—" He raised his hands and his fingers darted behind his head. A faint snapping sound, and his hair slid away from his head, revealing a purplish, red surface of ugly whorls and slits. He moved his hands forward then, on either side of his face, and his entire face came away, leaving a terrible mass of twists and ridges. He slipped the skin-like gloves from his hands and worked his skeletal fingers.

"There," he said, smiling a twisting, curling smile. "I made these," he added, holding up the face and the hair and the gloves.

The woman was unmoving, staring.

Brown stretched and his hairless head glistened in the moonlight that came through the dome. "Ah," he said, stepping toward the now shaking woman. His chopped lips trembled. "I love you," he said, whispering.

The woman's long, chilling scream was a lost sound among the quiet rotten rocks and the horrible motionless plants.

COLOR BLIND

By CHARLES A. STEARNS

*For that elusive green-white glamour, go to Venus,
the ads urged vain women. But that was only half
the story—just ask olive-skinned Sukey Jones.*

HER name was Sukei Kireina Jones, and the blood of South Asia was in her veins. Mix that with the Celtic, brother, and you've got something special. Her eyes were dark, and mostly a little sad; her hair was black as the Rim, and she stood barely five feet in heels, unless you count the curves, which, if Nature had been fool enough to straighten them out, would have added quite a lot—and taken away a lot too.

We called her Sukey, and kidded her some, and what made her so beautiful was, she didn't know it.

I had found her hanging around the Surface Transit offices, broke and alone, and got her the job as counter girl in the Company hash house on the edge of the spaceport. That was where she met my friend, Harry Thurbley.

Harry was a licensed senior space pilot, but he would never let any of us call him Captain Thurbley. He said the title sounded pompous, and who the hell was he, anyway. The squarest guy I ever met, but you would have thought that he was ashamed of that blue uniform. Me, Chuck Morris, I am only an engineer—a space going mechanic—and I would have given my share in the cosmic hereafter to wear it, I would have strutted some.

But uniform or no uniform, I wouldn't have stood a chance with Sukey Jones. From the moment those two set eyes on one another, she had been Harry's girl. I used to wonder how it would have been with her and me if I had never introduced them. Just wondering.

In those days there had got to be a heavy Venus passenger traffic. It had become fashionable for Earth women to bleach their skin to match their hair, and the coveted greenish-white paleness they wanted could

only be accomplished, it seemed, by spending several months under the sunless Venusian overcast, with its odd radiations.

Caterers to this fad left in scores for Venus. Tourist lodgings and recreational facilities sprang up on the frontier planet. Beauty got to be big business overnight.

This was only available to women with considerable money, of course. A round trip ticket cost just under twelve thousand dollars, and high living, on Venus, came high indeed.

Their poor sisters had recourse only to special lamps and lotions to simulate the pallor of the movie stars and the debutantes. It was not the same. Not in their own minds. It was the dream of every woman to make the pilgrimage, and not a few spent their life savings, embezzled, stowed away, or even sold themselves to Venusian white slavers for the chance of that elusive glamour.

Sukei's skin was of a wonderful, delicate olive shade, and she hated it. Whenever one of the female travelers would come in to eat, looking ghostly pale and opulent in their Martian lizard-skin coats, Sukey Jones would sigh. I could tell that in her small body there was a man-sized inferiority complex building up, but I didn't mention it to Harry. He would only have worried about her.

He was thoughtful of Sukey, and many a time when we got in, and he had business with Customs or the Port Authority, he would say to me, "Chuck, go and see Sukey for me, and tell her I'll be along."

And as for Sukey Jones, she may not have been overly bright, but that kind of treatment had been a rare thing in her twenty-three years of hard knocks. She worshipped Harry Thurbley.

That night in March we had set the



Illustration by Wallace Wood

Allair down on the field just after dusk. Harry had business at the Office, and I was to drop in and see Sukey first and let her know that he'd be in later. I didn't mind. I was always glad to do it.

I went into the restaurant, and the place was crowded with passengers for the 2200 Marsflight. I couldn't find Sukey. There was a strange girl behind the cash register. I asked her about it, and she said she didn't know anything; she had just been hired.

So I finally got Linda, one of the waitresses, aside, and got the story from her.

Seemed there had been a couple of women—society dames in from Venus on the Saturday run—and Sukey had heard one of them make a remark about her complexion. It was nothing much, just a whispered knife of criticism, but Sukey had flared up. Then the woman got really insulting, and Sukey had reached over the cash register and pulled out a big handful of her platinum locks.

That grab had cost her her job.

I WENT to her apartment, in a ramshackle tenement a couple of blocks away, and knocked on the door. A girl who claimed to be her roommate answered, and said that Sukey had moved out. She wasn't supposed to tell me where Sukey had gone if my name was Harry.

I said, who was Harry. I was an insurance claim adjuster, and had some money for her.

Sukey had gone to live with a Mrs. Althea Campbell. The address was 1711 Oak Drive. That was all the roommate knew.

Harry was waiting down at the office when I got back there. I told him what I had learned, and we caught a coptercab out to 1711 Oak Drive. I remember it was on a Thursday. That turned out to be kind of important.

It was almost ten o'clock when we arrived, but the lights were still on, and 1711 turned out to be quite a palace. "I didn't know Sukey had any friends like that!" I said.

Harry didn't answer. His mouth was a firm, tight line. He was still thinking of Sukey running out on him.

I pressed the button, and an egg-headed man in a monkey suit answered. He was the butler; you could tell that.

"A Miss Sukey Jones live here?" I said. His eyebrows elevated half an inch.

"There is a young woman *employed* here," he said. "I regret to say that this is her night off, and she is not here."

"Employed," I said to Harry. "She must have hired as a private secretary or something."

I doubt if the stiff in livery had smiled in years. He shouldn't have tried it. It almost cost him his teeth. "Hardly anything so grand as that," he said. "The girl is Mrs. Campbell's personal maid."

Harry was silent for a moment. I waited for him to speak. We looked at each other.

"Maybe we ought to talk to this Althea Campbell," I suggested.

The woman was nearer to forty than thirty, and she could have been handsome once. Even now her shape wouldn't have been bad if she'd taken off forty pounds. The poundage was unnatural and flabby, and her skin was blotched and unpleasant. She was a faded, natural blonde, I would say, but her hair was red now.

Harry was always polite. He went forward and introduced us. She was wearing a silk wrapper a couple of sizes too small, and she didn't get up to greet us.

Still, she didn't seem to be displeased by an unexpected visit by two males at 10:00 p.m. The look she gave Harry was as if she might eat him. Harry never seemed to notice how it was with women when he came into a room, but I could see it, raw and naked, on her face.

She was a widow, and Sukey had been working for her a week. Harry said he knew of a job in the Company office that he could get for Sukey, and he asked Mrs. Campbell to let her go, without telling her we'd been there.

Mrs. Campbell's face took on a little color, making it appear more mottled than ever. And her voice was too shrill to be comfortable. She said that maids were very difficult to find this day and time, and that if Sukey didn't mind it, we shouldn't mind either. She wouldn't give her up.

"Let's wait and see what Sukey has to say about it," I suggested.

Harry shook his head. "We can't do that. She mustn't know we've been here, Chuck."

"Why? Servants may be out of date, but there's nothing disgraceful about honest labor."

"Of course not," Harry said. "But to Sukey it must be embarrassing. That's why she didn't let me know what she was doing, don't you see? It must have been that."

Well, it was logical enough. And that was Harry for you. Always thinking first of Sukey's feelings, whereas I would probably have turned her across my knee. But we had to do something.

We were going to be in port for three weeks, and Harry made an appointment to come back the following Thursday, when Sukey was away from the house, and try to reason once more with Althea Campbell.

Harry went back the next week, and the week after that, and he wasn't having any luck, but he said that at least he could make sure that Sukey was still all right.

Meanwhile I did some snooping, and I found out several things about Mrs. Campbell. She was worth eighteen and a half million bucks, and she had spent half that much trying to regain a face, and figure, and complexion of twenty years ago, that she probably remembered better than they were.

I talked to one of her former servants and learned that Sukey could expect a hard time working for her. The woman was a kind of sadist with servants, but Sukey would put up with anything to get what she wanted, and I knew what it was she was after now. I knew why she had taken the job.

After I had learned this, I put in a visicall to the Oak Drive mansion. The butler's face appeared on the screen. I was too late.

I got hold of Harry as quick as I could, but I could see right away that he had already found out.

Mrs. Campbell had taken Sukey Jones and left last night for Venus.

I HAD known Harry Thurbley for ten years, and he was a phlegmatic sort. He had the kind of unshakable calm and nerve you only find in a man that's made peace with death a couple of times or so out beyond the planets. Once I had seen him walk into a mining power plant on Callisto and disarm a runaway pile that was due to explode in three minutes and blast away half the moon.

When he came out he hadn't even been sweating.

But he was upset now. I tried to calm him, but I guess he had a hunch. I had spent several years on Venus and knew the place as well as any Terran. I tried to persuade him that Sukey Jones wouldn't be in any danger so long as they stuck to the civilized northern part, but he didn't seem to half hear what I was saying.

A month passed, and we made another trip beyond the Belt. When we got back there was still no Sukey, and not even a letter. Harry and I went into the Super's office and talked him into a transfer to the Venus run for one trip.

It was less than five days later that we set the *Altair* down on the surface of the White Planet at Medea, the biggest port city on Venus. The low, spidery towers of the native architects of old were crowded and overshadowed by Earthstyle skyscrapers which had grown up, mostly, since the last time I had seen Venus, fifteen years ago.

It was Harry's first trip to the sister planet of Earth, and he seemed surprised at the mushrooming civilization. But he still couldn't rest until we'd given the ship into the hands of the ground crew and gone to hunt Sukey and her mistress.

Mrs. Campbell, we discovered, had checked in at the Majestic Hotel for one week, and left, giving no forwarding address. After that she had been heard from in two or three of the border cities. She had made the rounds of all the beauty parlors and quack establishments in town. This was her fourth trip to Venus, and all of the merchants knew her by sight.

But she was not, currently, visiting any of these places. It seemed that Althea Campbell, a couple of days ago, had disappeared, which was nothing to me, except that she had taken a tiny girl named Sukey Jones with her.

Mrs. Campbell may have had acquaintances about Venus, but not many friends. Especially among the natives, whom she loathed and treated like scum. The natives of the temperate belts were humanoid, and though primitive in culture, fairly intelligent.

They were thin, and not too bad-looking if you could get used to the fish-belly whiteness of their scaly skins, and a partial lack of symmetry in their bodies, such as

having one eye a couple of sizes bigger than the other one.

It was from one of the Venusians that we found our first clue. He was Argol Beg, the head of the native Security Police, an individual with silvery, heavy-lidded eyes, and long, nervous, quadruple-jointed fingers.

He mentioned a name that I had heard a long time ago, and forgotten. Marjud. Marjud had been one of the rebel chieftains who had fought against the Alliance in the late Venerian sectional war, and now was outlawed from the Northern settlements.

I call him a man, but I had seen pictures of Marjud once, and there were features about that gross body of his that no one except a Venusian would believe. He was a native of the steaming jungles of the torrid zone, a forbidden area where the native form mysteriously shifted and changed from generation to generation for reasons at which the anthropologists could only guess. His race was still barbaric, for the most part, which was why it was off limits.

It seemed that Marjud was now in the beauty racket. That could have handed me a laugh, except that we were too worried about Sukey.

We got a newspaper, the *Medean Times*, and sure enough, there was his ad, in scrambled English that hadn't even been changed by the proofreader.

See Marjud, High Priest of Love and Beauty
It Is for a Smooth, White Appearance and I
Will Give You the Limbs Long and Pale,
and Also Supple and Graceful.

The address of the contact man was given. I asked Argol Beg why he had not arrested Marjud. But Marjud's man had set up in the Colonial Quarter, where Argol Beg had no authority, and he was not wanted by the Earth colonial police.

"Come on," I said to Harry. "Let's see if we can locate the old gargoye." Harry was pretty worried by this time, and he didn't half understand what was going on, not knowing Venus.

"I'm with you, whatever you say," he said.

We visited the address given in the ad, and got to talk to a normal-appearing native with slit eyes and a fishy stare. He said that Marjud saw only Terran females, and he couldn't help us.

I persuaded him to change his mind in a few minutes, and then he told us that Marjud was staying in a dhol cave outside the city. The dhol caves were made by a long-dead, semi-intelligent race of quadrupeds, and it wasn't uncommon for the none-too-particular Venusians to set up housekeeping in them.

There was a guard hanging around the entrance to this one. The contact man pointed out the guard and fled. The guard argued and I had to slug him with the butt of my gun. Harry went over and looked at him.

He turned to me and his face was clammy white. It was one of the equatorial species.

"What's the matter?" I said.

"What is it?"

I told him. "Marjud is worse," I said.

"Stay here, Chuck," he said, drawing his own weapon. "If I don't come out within five minutes, come in blasting."

I STARTED to argue, but I knew that he really wanted it that way. I had more experience at the rough and tumble arts, but he had taken a back seat so far, and it was his right. It was for Sukey.

I waited, while the minutes dragged. Just as I was ready to go in, Harry came out. There was a sick look on his face that I had never seen before. He was one of those people who can't stand the sight of freaks or anomalies.

He took a deep breath of that damp, heavy, tasteless air, as though it were wine.

"You found him?"

"It was like—like hitting a—a—" He gagged.

"I know," I said. "I saw a picture of him once. What did you learn?"

"Probably it doesn't make any sense. She—Mrs. Campbell—gave him ten thousand dollars, Colonial money. I got that much out of him. In return he arranged for them to visit what he calls a 'sacred rainbow garden', whatever that means, near the equator. I got the approximate location of the place."

For the first time I got plenty scared. I knew about the rainbow gardens, all right. On most of the surface of Venus the direct rays of Sol never penetrated the numerous layers of poisonous clouds that shielded and sheltered the livable atmosphere and the

mild, though dreary climate underneath. But in certain areas curious updrafts allowed small shafts of sunlight to reach the surface. The areas were never large, but wherever the light struck, the effect upon a drab, colorless world was like magic.

For a reason that science had never been able to learn, objects on Venus, whenever exposed to direct sunlight, instead of giving off white light, diffracted it into its spectral components, and showed up in gorgeous, blinding hues. Also, the vegetation within these charmed areas was subtly changed. The constant, radiant mist caused the trees and plants to take on warped, nightmarish shapes.

The natives worshipped the rainbow gardens, and bathed in the colored mists that eternally swept up into the blackness of space from the surface.

I didn't want to upset Harry, but I had spent enough years on Venus to hear a lot of curious stories that had circulated through the north about those strange regions.

"Come on," I said, "we'd better not waste any time."

We had been able to charter an old-fashioned flutter-plane, which could land more or less vertically, and Harry had the approximate longitude of the place from Marjud.

We could see it a long way off, fortunately, and it was like a big waterspout, except for its preternatural straightness, reaching up in a silvery, swirling column through the gray cloud layer twelve miles overhead.

He didn't swing the flutter-plane too near to it. The updrafts around it, at this altitude, were supposed to move at terrific speed, and could shatter even a rocketship.

There was some kind of gray stone building rising out of the gray-green forest at the foot of the column, and we landed a quarter of a mile away, so as not to attract attention. We walked in, and in a few minutes were able to make out the domes of the temple rising over the tops of the trees.

The masonry was of a rough, dark basalt, crude and unbeautiful. The work of the primitive tribes that lived in the area. I had heard of giant towers and spired old cities which were supposed to have been the work of an ancient, long-dead, and highly evolved race, but there had never been any evidence of such places. Probably these native temples

had started the stories. There was plenty of reason to believe that the planet Venus was new and in the first evolution when men from Earth arrived.

Behind the temple itself rose a fifty foot wall of the same undistinguished stone, and inside this wall the mysterious column of mist rose. Within that mist lay the rainbow garden.

The only entrance appeared to be through the temple itself.

WE WERE in an enormous rotunda, a sort of congregational throne room where thousand of natives might gather during the orgies that were irregularly held.

There was not a living thing in sight in all that domed vastness. Hundreds of idols of obscure primitive gods lined the walls.

Harry cupped his hands to his mouth. "Anybody here?" The words bellowed and bounced against the lofty ceiling, echoing and reechoing. And they got results right away.

From somewhere among those shadows at the other end of the room there was a blue flash. The air crackled and fried near my ear. We flopped on the floor and returned the fire. There was a scream. One of us had made a lucky hit. We waited ten minutes and advanced.

We found the body of a Venusian in colonial garb, one of the slim, regular-featured northern tribesmen. I knew that he must be Marjud's agent, for Northerners were rarely found in these latitudes if they could help it.

Beyond the dead Venusian lay a narrow passageway that must lead to the inner chambers.

Harry wanted to rush the place. "Take it easy," I said. "These boys are tricky, and they have little poison spears that kill on contact. There's bound to be a few of them hanging around the garden—the priests. That was Marjud's underling back there. We haven't met the natives yet."

We met them right away. Three of them had been waiting for us in a sort of transept. Something—a blunt hatchet probably—bounced off my shoulder and sent a sharp pain through it. I swung my fist and caught the assailant in his skeleton midriff, doubling him up. I could only see the outline of his shape in that gloom, and I didn't like it. It

was out of a nightmare. Harry was having better luck. He shoved the muzzle of his gun into the Venusian's belly and burned a hole through him.

The other one tried to run, but he didn't get far.

Harry was breathing hard. He grinned at me. "You okay?" he said.

"I'll have a shoulder that's sore as hell for a while," I said, "but let's go."

A dozen passageways led from the main one. "Where do we look first?" Harry wanted to know.

"We'd better split up. That way we can cover more territory."

"I don't like to leave you alone with that bum shoulder."

"Forget it. If there were any more around, they've cleared out by now. Get going."

I had a pocket light that I used in the darkest passages. Most of the cloisters and compartments were empty, and didn't look as though they'd been used in years.

At the end of one passageway I found the rooms of the priests, very sparsely furnished, and from there I got a glimpse from a narrow ventilation slit at the garden itself. The colored mists and the weird trees. But no animate being was moving out there.

In the last room, the door was barred with a crude, vertical bolt. I blasted off the bar, and opened the door. Behind it I found Sukey Jones.

SHE stood there looking scared, and not believing that it was really me. Her eyes were big as dollars.

And when she was sure, the way she threw herself at me and hugged me, it was embarrassing.

"Chuck, Chuck! I never thought I'd see you again. I never—I'm so—!" And that was all I got out of her for the next couple of minutes. I gave her my handkerchief to dab at her eyes, and I got the story at last.

She had been there two days without food and water, locked in.

They had arrived a week ago, and during that time she had seen nothing except the interior of this room.

Althea Campbell had heard rumors of the rainbow gardens, and that the natives, by bathing in the radiation given off by the colored mists, were able to restore youth and

vigor for long periods of time. She had seen the chance of restoring her own body to its youthful bloom and of working the miracle that she had sought for so many years on half a dozen planets. She had sought out Marjud, who alone had contacts that could get them into the forbidden area.

"I still don't get it," I said. "Where is she now, and why has she got you locked in here?"

"I was afraid after we arrived, and I didn't want to do it. She said we had to take off our clothes and go with the priests into the rainbow garden. I refused, and she slapped me and said that I was impertinent and ungrateful. I threatened to run away and tell the authorities, so they locked me in here.

"The she-devil!" I said.

"Oh, she's really not so bad," said Sukey, forgivingly. "It's just that she's a little mad when it comes to being young and beautiful. She was forever talking about the way her arms and legs looked, and all, and crying, and bawling me out."

"Come on," I said. "Let's find Harry and get out of here."

Her lip quivered. "H-Harry? Is he here too?"

"Somewhere," I said, trying to frown at her, and not succeeding, "and worried to death. If I was him I would skin you alive."

"I just wanted a chance to come to Venus. That's why I took the job as maid to Mrs. Campbell. I knew that she was tremendously wealthy and came to Venus every year to the beauty culturists."

I didn't press the subject. The sky over Venus hadn't faded her complexion much, luckily.

It was still fine, even if she did look a little beat.

We went out into the hallway and I yelled for Harry. He answered. He seemed to be outside.

I looked out one of the ventilation slits. He was standing out there with his back to me, looking into the rainbow garden. The mists were rising in wispy colors here and there, and I could tell without looking at my chrono that the long Venusian night was approaching, for the distorted shapes of the trees were vague, and could no longer be seen more than a few yards away.

"Up here!" I said. And he looked up.

He pointed to the garden. "Thought I heard somebody calling out there," he said, pointing.

"Don't go away," I said. "And don't go in there, whatever you do. I'll be right out."

I grabbed Sukey's arm. "We'll surprise him," I told her.

SUKEY JONES came up from behind Harry and put her hand on his arm. He turned and they just looked at each other for the space of half a minute.

Harry's voice was kind of choked. He said, "Sukey, I—"

And then we all heard it. It was a woman crying. The sound came from the garden. Harry took a step toward the mists.

"Wait," I said. And I shouted, "Mrs. Campbell, is that you?"

"Here!" Her voice was faint and plaintive. Just as I had remembered it.

"Come on out. We've come to take you home."

"I—I can't."

"How long has she been in there?" I asked Sukey. "Do you know?"

"All of the time, I suppose."

I shook my head. "It's risky business, but we can't leave her, I suppose. I'll go in."

"I can't let you do that," Harry said. "I'm the logical one to go. Listen!" We could hear her crying. A vexed, lost-little-girl sound.

I shoved Harry aside. "You don't know what you're getting into," I said. "Take Sukey, and—"

That was the first and only time that Harry ever swung at me. The first thing I knew, I was sitting on the ground with my head spinning.

Harry was looking down at me and grinning sardonically. "I hated to do that, Chuck," he said, "but you see, it has to be me that goes after her."

He turned and took both of Sukey's thin shoulders in his hands. He couldn't speak for a while. His eyes were talking, though; saying they were awfully sorry. And then he took a couple of steps into that colored mist before he stopped and looked back.

He was still smiling, but it was a secret smile. He said, "It's too bad, Sukey, but you know, eighteen million bucks are eighteen million bucks."

"What the—?" I said.

"Harry, darling, is that you?" The voice of Mrs. Campbell was closer now.

"Coming, Althea dear!" he said, and laughed at me. "Do you suppose I *wasted* all those Thursdays, Chuck?" he said. "Bye. Take care of Sukey for me. Althea and I'll be along later."

He turned his back on us and went deeper into the mists, calling her name, spreading the bushes with his hands and trying to see her.

He was hazy now, hardly visible.

But I saw Althea Campbell just an instant before he did. She came out of the rainbow mist from behind him, and her now-blond hair glimmered with reds and greens, and blues and gold and purple. Her naked body was snow white. She had got her money's worth, I suppose. Marjud had promised her that pale complexion.

And the curious radiations had given her smooth legs and arms that were pearl-white and long, and supple, and graceful.

She came from behind Harry and put her arms around him.

All of them.

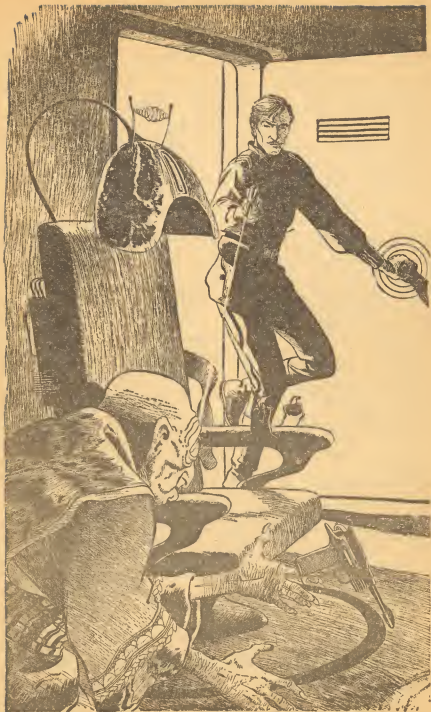


Illustration by Herman Vestal

The Ambassadors of Flesh

By POUL ANDERSON

Where they came from or where they went, no one knew. Yet a thousand young maidens of Varrak were missing, hidden somewhere amid the wild stars of the barbarian hordes. Who but dude Flandry stood a chance of tracking them through the asteroid wastes?

"CRIME," said Captain Dominic Flandry of the Terran Empire's Intelligence Corps, "is entirely a matter of degree. If you shoot your neighbor in order to steal his property, you are

a murderer and a thief, and will be psychorevised and enslaved. If, however, you gather a band of lusty fellows, knock off a couple of million people, and take their planet, you are a great conqueror, a world



hero, and your name goes down in the history books. Sooner or later, this inconsistency seeps into the national consciousness and causes a desire for universal peace. That is known as decadence, especially among historical philosophers who never had to do any of the actual fighting. The Empire is currently in the early stages of decadence, which is the most agreeable time to inhabit: peace and pleasure, and the society not yet rotted so far that chaos sets in. One might say the Empire is a banana just starting to show brown spots."

He was not jailed for his remarks because he made them in private, sitting on the balcony of his lodge on Varrak's southern continent and enjoying his usual noontime breakfast. His flamboyantly pajamaed legs were cocked up on the rail; sighting over his coffee cup and between his feet, he saw the mountainside drop steeply down to a green sun-flooded wilderness. The light played over a lean, straight-boned face and a long hard body which made him look like anything but a petty noble of a sated imperium. But his business—maintaining the status quo of a realm threatened by internal decay and outside aggression—was a strenuous one.

His current mistress, Ella, offered him a cigarette and he inhaled it into lighting. She was a stunning blonde whom he had bought a few weeks previously in the planet's one city, Fort Lone; he gathered that she was of the old pioneer stock, semi-aristocrats who had fallen on evil times and been sold for debt. With such people he sympathized, but there was nothing he could do about the system; and she could have worse owners than himself.

He took another sip of coffee, wiped his mustache, and drew a breath to resume his musings. An apologetic cough brought his head around, and he saw his valet, the only other being in the lodge. This was a slim humanoid from Shalmu, with a hairless green skin, prehensile tail, and impeccable manners; Flandry had christened him Chives and taught him several things which made him valuable in more matters than laying out a dress suit.

"Pardon me, sir, Admiral Fenross is calling from the city."

Flandry cursed and got up. "Fenross!

What's he doing on this planet? Tell him to—no, never mind, it's anatomically impossible." He sauntered into the study, frowning. There was no love lost between him and his superior, but Fenross wouldn't call a man on furlough unless it was urgent.

The screen held a gaunt, sharp, red-haired face which dripped sweat past dark-shadowed eyes. "There you are! Put in your scrambler, combination 770." When Flandry had adjusted the dials, the admiral said harshly: "Furlough cancelled. Get busy at once." With a sudden break in his voice: "Though God knows what you can do. But it means all our heads."

Flandry sucked in his cheeks with a long drag of smoke. "What is it—sir?"

"The sack of Fort Lone was more than a raid—"

"What sack?"

"You don't KNOW?"

"Haven't tuned the telescreen for a week, sir. I wanted to rest."

Fenross snarled something and said thickly, "Well, then, a barbarian horde streaked in yesterday, shot up all the defense posts, landed, and in three hours had put the place to the torch and looted all the available wealth. Also took about a thousand citizens, mostly women. They made a clean getaway before the nearest naval base was even alerted. No telling where they came from or where they went."

Flandry cursed again, vividly. He knew the situation. The Taurian Sector of the Empire was meant as a buffer; beyond it lay the wild stars, an unexplored jungle swarming with barbarian hordes who had gotten spaceships and atomic blasters too soon and used them only to plunder. There was always war on these marches, raids and punitive expeditions. But still—an attack on Varrak! He found it hard to believe.

"That's not our department, sir, unless we're wanted to track down just who did it," he ventured. "The navy does the fighting, I'm told. So why pick on me?"

"You and every other man in the sector. Listen, Flandry, the barbarians have made away with her Highness, the Lady Megan of Luna, princess of the blood and the Emperor's favorite granddaughter!"

"Hmmm—so." Not a muscle stirred in Flandry's countenance, but he felt his belly

grow tense and cold. "I . . . see. What clues have you got?"

"Not many. One officer did manage to hide in the ruins and take a solidographic film—just a few minutes' worth. It may give us a lead; perhaps the xenological division can identify the raiders from it. But still—" Fenross paused, it obviously hurt him to say so, but he got it out: "We need you."

"I should say you do, dear chief." Modesty was not a failing of Flandry's. "All right, I'll flit directly over. Cheers." He cut the circuit and went back onto the balcony. Chives was clearing away the breakfast dishes and Ella sat smoking. "So long, children. I'm on my way."

The girl watched him with eyes like blued silver. "What is it, Nick?" she asked quietly.

Flandry's mouth twisted. "I'm not sure yet, but I think I've just been condemned to death."

IT WAS like a scene from hell.

Against a tumbled, blazing background of ruin, the barbarians were raging in an armored swarm: huge burly men in helmet and cuirass, some carrying archaic swords. The picture was focused on a dais where a dozen young women were huddled, stripped alike of clothing and hope, the wildness of terror fading before despair. Some of them were being carried off toward a disc-shaped spaceship, others were still in the middle of the horde. They were being sold. Great gems, silver and gold, the loot of the city, were being tossed at the gnomish unhuman figure which squatted on the dais and handed down each purchase to a grinning conqueror.

The film ended. Flandry looked past the shattered walls of the building where he sat, to the smoking desolation which had been Fort Lone. Imperial marines were on guard, a relief station had been set up, a heavy battlewagon hung in the sky—all of which was too late to do much good.

"Well," snapped Fenross, "what d'you make of it?"

Flandry turned the enlarger knob, until one of the solid-seeming images stood gigantic before him. "Definitely human," he said. "Except for that dwarf creature,

I'd say they were all of terrestrial race."

"Of course! I know that much, you idiot. They must be from some early colony out here which got lost and reverted to barbarism. There have been such cases before. But which one? Is it even on record?"

"The spaceship is an odd design. I think there are some beings in the Merseian hegemony who still build that type, but it's not what I would expect barbarians imitating our boats to have."

Fenross gulped, and his knuckles whitened on the table edge. "If the Merseians are behind this—"

Flandry gestured at the dwarf. "Tall, dark, and handsome there may offer a clue to their origin. I don't know. I'll have to consult the files. But I must say this raid has a strange pattern. Varrak is light-years inside the border. There are plenty of tempting spots closer than this to the Wilderness. Then, the raiders knew exactly where to shoot and bomb to knock out all the defenses. And, of course, they got the princess. Looks very much as if they had inside help, doesn't it?"

"I thought of that too. Every survivor of the garrison is being hypnoprobed, but so far none of them have known anything."

"I doubt that any will. Our enemy is too smooth an operator to leave such clues. If he had collaborators in the fort, they left with the raiders, and we'll list them as 'missing, presumed disintegrated in action.' But what's the story on her Highness?"

Fenross groaned. "She was taking a tour of the outer marches. Those meatheads back on Terra should have known better than that! Or maybe the Imperial whim overruled them. The Lady Megan has the Emperor around her little finger. Anyhow, she went incognito, with a secret-service detachment to guard her, of course. But the raiders just smashed down the walls of the place where she was staying, shot all her guards, and made off with her and her servants."

"Again," said Flandry, "it looks like inside information. Why else should they hit Varrak, except to get the princess? The looting was just a sideline. And apparently they knew precisely where she was housed." He took out a cigarette and inhaled nervously. "What d'you think their motive is? Ransom?"

"I hope to God it's just money. But I'm afraid— These barbarian kings aren't stupid. I'm afraid her ransom will be political and military concessions which we can ill afford. Especially if the raiders, as you suggest, are really Merseian agents. The Emperor will give it to them, regardless." Fenross laid his head on his clenched fists, "This could mean the beginning of the end for Terra."

"I suppose his Majesty has not yet been informed?"

"Of course not! I know him. His first act on learning the news will be to have everybody who could possibly be responsible executed. That includes you and me, in case you don't know. I think we can suppress the information for a couple of weeks, maybe a month, but certainly no longer. If we don't get her back before then—" Fenross drew a finger across his throat.

Flandry scowled. He was uncommonly fond of living. "What are you doing?" he asked.

"Alerting all our agents. We'll comb the Wilderness. We'll fill the whole damned Merseian Empire with spies. But—I'm afraid we haven't time to do anything. Space is just too big—" Fenross turned angry eyes on his subordinate. "Well, don't just sit there! Get going!"

"No sense duplicating effort, darling sir." Flandry calculated his insolence deftly. "I've got a notion of my own, if you'll give me a free hand to play with it. I'll want access to all the files, including the most confidential."

"Go ahead," mumbled Fenross. "Enjoy yourself while you can."

Flandry got up. "It might stimulate my mind if a small reward were offered," he said mildly.

THE lodge was as good a place as any to begin his work. Telestats from the central files could be sent directly to him there, on scrambled circuit. A monitor in his receiver, responding to the Secret order, printed the material in code on tapes which would disintegrate within an hour. Flandry sat in dressing gown and slippers, wading through meter after meter of information; much of it had cost lives, some of it was

worth an empire. It was the job of Intelligence to know everything about everyone in the attainable Galaxy. Chives kept him supplied with coffee and cigarettes.

Ella stole up behind him near dawn and laid a hand on his head. "Aren't you ever coming to bed, Nick?" she asked.

"Not yet," he grunted. "I'm on the track of a hunch. And if my notion is right, we have to move fast; there'll be less than the two weeks beloved Fenross, may he rot in hell, is counting on. Our enemy will see that his august Majesty gets the news before then."

She nodded, the light sliding down her long gold hair, and sat down at his feet. Slowly the sun rose.

"Stars and planets and little pink asteroids," muttered Flandry at last. "I may have the answer. Electronic cross-filing is a wonderful invention."

She regarded him wordlessly. He rubbed his chin, feeling its unshaven bristles scratchy on his palm. "But what I'm going to do with the answer, I don't know. Talk about sticking your head in a lion's mouth—"

He paced the floor restlessly. "Chives is a handy fellow with a gun or a set of burglar's tools," he said, "but I need someone else."

"Can I help, Nick?" asked Ella. "I'd be glad to. You have been good to me."

He regarded her for a long moment. Tall and lithe and fair, with something in her of the strength which had won this world from jungle—"Ella," he inquired suddenly, "can you shoot?"

"I used to hunt ferazæes in the mountains," she said.

"And—look—what would you say if I set you free? Not only that, but hunted up all the rest of your family and bought them free and set them up with some land of their own. The reward would cover that, with a bit to spare for my next poker game."

Sudden tears were in her eyes. "I don't have any words," she said.

"But would you risk death, torture, degradation—whatever punishment a crazy all-powerful mind could think of, if we failed? You aren't so badly off now. Will you set it all on a turn of the cards?"

"Of course," she said quietly, and rose to her feet.

He laughed and slapped her in a not very brotherly fashion. "All right! You can come out on the target range and prove what you said about shooting while Chives packs."

IN FLANDRY'S private speedster it was a three-day flit to Vor. After rehearsing what must be done, he spent the time amusing himself and his companions. There might not be another chance.

Vor had been settled early in the days of Imperial expansion, and had become a rich world, the natural choice of capital for the duke who governed the Taurian Sector. It was like another Terra—less grandiose, more bustling and businesslike—and the Sector itself was almost an empire within the Empire, a powerful realm of many stars whose ruler sat high in the councils of the Imperium.

Flandry left Chives in the boat at the main spaceport, and gave the portmaster a sizeable bribe to forget that his vessel was more heavily armed than a civilian craft ought to be. He and Ella caught a flittercab downtown and got a penthouse in one of the better hotels. Flandry never stinted himself when he was on expense account, but this time the penthouse had a business reason. You could land a spaceboat on the roof, if a quick getaway became necessary.

He called the ducal palace that evening and got through to the chief social secretary. "Captain Sir Dominic Flandry of his Majesty's Intelligence Corps," he said pompously to the effeminate face. "I would like an audience with his Grace. There is some business to discuss."

"I am afraid, sir, that—"

A telescreen buzzed by the secretary's elbow. "Excuse me." He spoke to it. When he faced back around, his expression was obsequious. "Of course, sir. His Grace would be pleased to see you at fourteen hundred tomorrow."

"Good," said Flandry. "I'll buy you a lollipop sometime, Junior." He switched off and laughed at Ella's astonished face. "That does it," he told her. "Someone was monitoring the secretary, and when he got my name, let the secretary know in no un-

certain terms that my presence is urgently desired at the palace—or, at least, that an invitation would allay my suspicions for a while."

There were no lights on, but by the radiance of Vor's one great moon he saw her bite her lip. "That doesn't sound good," she said.

"It sounds very much as if my notion is right. Look here." Flandry had been over all the points a dozen times, but he liked to hear himself talk. "The Intelligence Corps is highly efficient if you point it in the right direction. In this case, the kidnapping was so designed that Fenross is pointed in a hundred different directions, none of them correct. He's tackling the hopeless job of investigating a million barbarian stars and the hostile Merseian Empire. But I, having a nasty suspicious mind, thought that there might be elements within our own territory which would not mind having the Emperor's favorite granddaughter for a guest.

"That alien-type spaceship was meant as a clue toward Merseia, but I didn't like it. Merseia is too far away from here for Wilderness barbarians to copy from them; and if the raid was their doing, why should they give themselves away so blatantly? Likewise, ordinary barbarian looters would not have come to Varrak in the first place, and wouldn't have had such accurate information in the second place. Even Merseia was unlikely to know about the princess' tour. Oh, they were genuine enough outlanders, you could see that on them—but who hired them, and who provided the leadership?

"That little gnome thing gave me a hunch. He was obviously in some position of authority, or he wouldn't have been demanding loot in exchange for those girls—the raiders would simply have taken the women themselves. The files held no information on a race of that exact description, but I did find out that his Grace, Duke Alfred of Tauria, has a number of aliens in his household, some of them from unknown regions where only a few human ships have ventured.

"Well, it seems logical. Before long, some barbarian king is going to demand a goodly chunk of this sector as Megen's

ransom. She may be returned then, with her memory wiped clean of the circumstances, or she may not. The important thing is that the king will get the territory. The Emperor will suppose we can fight a war to get it back. But the king will be a puppet of Alfred's, and it'll be Alfred's own army which bears the brunt of that campaign. The duke, pretending all the time to be on our side, will see to it that we're beaten back and lose the rest of Tauria to boot. Then he can set himself up as an independent ruler, or he can make a deal with some rival empire like Merseia. In either case, we lose one of our main bulwarks.

"At least," finished Flandry, "that's how I'd work the business."

Ella shivered, and there was something haunted in her eyes. "War," she whispered. "Killing, burning, looting, enslaving—no!"

"It's up to us to stop it," said Flandry. "I can't tell Fenross my suspicions yet; even if he believed me, which is doubtful, the Taurian division of the Corps is probably full of Alfred's agents. He'd find out and take steps to halt us. We'd probably all find ourselves jailed for treason. Now by announcing myself here, I must have alarmed his Grace. He'll want to know if I'm really on his trail—"

A shadow blocked out the moon and moved across the floor. Flandry peered cautiously through the window. Below the great skyscraper, the night city flared and blazed with a million jeweled lights, all the way up to the huge fortress-like castle on the hill. But there was a flitter landing on his roof.

"Quick work," muttered Flandry between his teeth. His blaster slid from its holster. "I thought the duke would wait to see me, but apparently not."

Ella cradled a repeater rifle in her arms. In the darkened room, a shaft of moonlight threw her face into white, unreal relief. "They may be innocent," she said.

"They wouldn't land here without asking if they were." Flandry saw half a dozen dark forms get out and start toward the penthouse. Moonrays glittered on metal. "Local assassins, I daresay, hired to nab us. Let 'em have it!"

His blaster roared, a thunderbolt leaped

through the windowpane and wrapped one man in flame. The others yelled, scattering. Ella's rifle spoke, and someone reeled on the edge of the roof and toppled horribly over the wall. Bullets cracked against the house.

"If this were ordinary innocent robbery, the police would be down on us like hawks," observed Flandry. "But they've been warned off here for tonight." His nostrils dilated. "Sleepy gas! Get your mask!"

The fight snarled for minutes. Two men came behind the house, blew open the door with a grenade, and sprang into the living room. Ella cut them down as Flandry fired out the window. Then there was silence.

"That's all," said Flandry. His voice came muffled through the mask. "Clumsy job. Friend Alfred must be rattled. Well, we'll give him time to think up something really fiendish for us." He stepped over to the service screen and punched its button. "I trust the manager has also been told to mind his own business tonight. . . . Hello, service? I'm afraid there's a bit of a mess in our place. Can you send someone up to clean it?"

THE audience hall was huge, and earlier dukes had furnished it with a luxury of gold and tapestry which was somewhat overwhelming. The present master hadn't bothered to remove this, but his more austere personality showed in the comfortable furniture and the armed guards who formed an unmoving wall on either side. Flandry felt dwarfed, but he walked with his usual swagger up to the throne, where he delivered a sweeping bow. In colorful clothes and ceremonial sword, he outshone the man who sat there.

Duke Alfred was big, his muscles running toward middle-aged paunch but hardness still on the blocky gray-bearded face. Flandry had met him briefly, some years before, and marked him for a dangerous man. "Be at ease," he said. His voice and the expressionless countenance did not echo the hospitable words. "Whom have you here?" He nodded at Ella, who crouched abjectly on the carpet.

"A small present for your Grace," said Flandry. "She may amuse you." There was nothing suspicious about that; one custom-

arily brought gifts when visiting a noble, and both of them had been X-rayed for weapons as they entered.

"Hm." Interest and appreciation flickered in the duke's eyes. "Look at me, wench." Ella raised a timid face. She was quite an actress, as Flandry had already learned. "Good. Take her to the harem." A gigantic four-armed Gorzunan slave kowtowed and led her out.

"Well," said Alfred, "what did you wish to see me about?"

"A trifling matter, your Grace, but it may be that you can furnish information my service needs." Flandry spun a plausible tale of investigating some Merseian agents who were being sent to stir up discord in the outer provinces. Tactfully, he mentioned the fight last night and his belief that the enemy knew who was trailing them and had tried to wipe him out. Perhaps the duke had some news of their activities? So far they had not manifested themselves in Tauria, but it was as well to make sure.

No, there was nothing. If any such news did come, the duke would certainly make it known to the Corps. Meanwhile, he was a busy man. Good day, Captain.

Flandry backed out. When he got to the castle gates, his spine crawled. Alfred was not going to let him get away so easily. There was bound to be another attempt to capture him and hypnoprobe him to find out if he really suspected anything. And this time the duke wasn't going to trust hired thugs.

Flandry went downtown to the local Corps office and filed a routine report on his ostensible mission. Alfred's men would be bound to check up on that much. More surreptitiously, he fetched a standard disguise kit and weapons from the locker where he had left them.

He ate a lonely supper in a restaurant, thinking rather wistfully of Ella, and dawdled over his liqueur. Two men who had entered shortly after him and taken a nearby table idled too, but rather awkwardly.

Flandry studied them without seeming to do so. One was a small, clever-looking chap, the other was big and rangy and had a military bearing. He must be one of

the household guards, out of uniform for the occasion. He would do.

Flandry got up and strolled into the street. His shadows followed, mingling with the crowd. He could have shaken them easily enough, but that wasn't his intention. Give them every break instead; they were hard-working men and deserved a helping hand.

He caught a flittercab. "Know any dives?" he asked fatuously. "You know, music, girls, anything goes, but not too expensive."

"Sure, sir." The cabbie grinned and flew toward the slums which fringed the town. They landed on the twenty-fifth flange of a tall building which blinked with garishly obscene lights. Another cab spiraled down behind them.

Flandry spent a while in the bar, amused at the embarrassment of his shadows, and then picked a girl, a slim little thing with a red insolent mouth. She snuggled against him as they went down the corridor. A door opened for them and they went through.

"Sorry, sister." Flandry pulled out his stunner and let her have a medium beam. She'd be out for hours. He laid her on the bed and stood waiting, the weapon in his hand.

It was not long before the door opened again. His followers were there. Had they bribed or threatened the madam? Flandry's stunner dropped the smaller man.

The big one was on him like a tiger—a skilled twist, and the gun clanged free against the wall. Flandry drove a knee upward. Pain lanced through him as it jarred against body armor. The guardsman got a hold which should have pinned him. Flandry writhed free with a trick he knew, whirled about, and delivered a rabbit punch that had all his weight behind it. The guardsman fell.

For a moment Flandry, panting, hesitated. It was safest to murder those two, but— He settled for giving his victims a hypo to keep them cold. Then he stepped out the window onto the emergency landing and signalled for a cab on his wristphone. When it arrived the driver looked into a blaster muzzle.

"We've got three sleepers to get rid of,"

said Flandry cheerfully. "On your way, friend, unless you want to add a corpse to the museum. You tote them."

They left town well behind and found a region of woods, where they landed. Flandry stunned and hypoed the driver, and laid all four out under a tree. As an afterthought he folded their hands on their breasts and put white flowers in their fingers.

Now to work! He stripped them and took out his kit. The ID machine got busy, recording every detail of the guardsman's appearance. When he was finished, he threw his loot in the cab and took off. The sleepers would take till tomorrow to wake up, and then, without clothes or money, would need another day or more to reach an area where they could get help and report what had happened; by that time the affair would be over, one way or another.

As the autopilot flew him back, Flandry studied the guardsman's papers. At the edge of town he abandoned the cab and took another to the spaceport. He was sure there would be ducal agents watching there. They saw him enter his boat, get clearance for interstellar space, and take off. Presumably his mission was finished, or else he was scared and hightailing it for safety; in either case the enemy would tend to write him off, which would help matters considerably.

What the agents did not see was Flandry and Chives hard at work disguising the Terran. Much can be done with plastic face masks, false fingertips and the rest. It wouldn't pass a close examination, but Flandry was hoping there wouldn't be one. When he got through, he was Lieutenant Roger Bergen of the ducal household guards. The boat landed near a village some fifty kilometers from town. Flandry caught the morning monorail back.

He did not report to his colonel when he entered the castle. That would have been asking for a hypnoprobe. But it was pretty clear that Bergen's job had been secret, none of his messmates would have known of it—so if they saw Bergen scurrying around the place, too busy for conversation, it would not occur to them that anything had gone wrong. Of course, the deception could only last a few hours, but Flandry

was betting that he would only need that long.

In fact, he reflected grimly, I'm betting my life.

ELLA the slave, who had been Ella McIntyre and a free woman of Varrak's hills, did not like the harem. There was something vile about its perfumed atmosphere, and she hoped the duke would not send for her that night. If he did—well, that was part of the price. But she was left alone. There was a dormitory for the lesser inmates, like a luxurious barracks, and a wide series of chambers for them to lounge in, and silent nonhuman slaves to bring them food. She prowled restlessly about as the day waned. The other women watched her but said little; such new arrivals must be fairly common.

But she had to make friends, fast. The harem was the most logical place for the duke to hide his prisoner, secrecy and seduction were the natural order of things here. But it would be a gossipy little world. She picked an alert-looking girl with wide bright eyes, and wandered up to her and smiled shyly. "Hello," she said. "My name is Ella."

"Just come in, I suppose?"

"Yes, I'm a present. Ummm—ah—how is it here?"

"Oh, not such a bad life. Not much to do. Gets a little boring." Ella shivered at the thought of a lifetime inside these walls, but nodded meekly. The other girl wanted to know what was going on outside, and Ella spent some hours telling her.

The conversation finally drifted the way she hoped. Yes—something strange. The whole western suite had been sealed off, and there were household troopers on guard at the door to the hallway. Somebody new must be housed there, and speculation ran wild on the who and the why.

Ella held her tension masked with a shivering effort. "Have you any idea who it might be?" she asked brightly.

"I don't know. Maybe some alien. His Grace has funny tastes. But you'll find that out, my dear."

Ella bit her lips.

That night she could not sleep at all. It was utterly dark, a thick velvety black full

of incense, it seemed to strangle her. She wanted to scream and run, run between the stars till she was back in the loved lost hills of Varrak. A lifetime without seeing the sun or feeling the hill-wind on her face! She turned wearily, wondering why she had ever agreed to help Flandry.

But if he lived, and came to her, she could tell him what he wanted to know. If he lived! And even if he did, they were in the middle of a fortress. He would be flayed alive, and she—*God, let me sleep. Just let me sleep and forget.*

The fluorotubes came on again with morning, a cold dawn. She bathed in the swimming pool and ate her breakfast without tasting. She wondered if she looked as tired and haggard as she felt.

A scaled hand touched her shoulder. She whirled about with a little shriek and looked into a beaked reptile face. It spoke hissing: "You are the new concubine?"

She tried to answer but her throat tightened up.

"Come." The guard turned and strode away. Numbly, she went after him. The chatter in the harem died as she went by, and the eyes that followed were frightened. A girl was not summoned by an armed guard for pleasure.

They went down a long series of chambers. At the end there was a door. It opened at the guard's gesture, and he waved her in. As he followed, the door closed behind him.

The room was small and bare. There was a chair with straps and wires and a switchboard; she recognized the electronic torture machine which left no marks on the flesh. In another chair crouched a being who was not human. Its small hunched body was wrapped in gorgeous robes, and great lusterless eyes regarded her from the bulging hairless head.

"Sit down." A thin hand waved her to the electronic chair, and she took it helplessly. "I want to talk to you. You will do well to answer without lies." The voice was high and squeaky, but there was nothing ridiculous about the goblin who spoke. "For your information, I am Sarlish of Jagranath, which lies beyond the Empire; I am his Grace's chief intelligence officer, so you see this is no routine matter. You were brought

here by a man of whom I have suspicions. Why?"

"As—a gift—sir," she whispered.

"*Timeo Danaos et dona ferentes,*" said Sarlish surprisingly. "I did not learn of it till this morning, or I would have investigated sooner. You are just a common slave?"

"Yes—sir—he bought me on Varrak before coming here—"

"Varrak, eh? I'd like to hypnoprobe you, but that would leave you in no fit state for his Grace tonight if you should be innocent. I think—" Sarlish stroked his meager chin contemplatively. "Yes. A bit of pain will disorganize your mind enough so that if you are lying, the proper questions will bring out inconsistencies. After that we can see about the probe. I am sorry." He gestured to the guard.

ELLA leaped up, yelling. The guard snatched for her and she ducked free, driving a kick at his belly. He grunted and stepped back. She threw herself at the door. As it opened, the reptile hands closed on her arm. Whirling, she brought the extended fingers of her free hand up into his eyes. He screamed and backed away.

"Ah, so," murmured Sarlish. He took out a stunner and aimed it judicially at the struggling pair.

"I wouldn't try that, Dollie," said a voice in the doorway.

Sarlish spun about to face a blaster. "Bargen!" he cried, dropping his weapon. Then, slowly: "No. Captain Flandry, isn't it?"

"In person, and right in the traditional nick of time." The blinded guard lurched toward him. Flandry shot him with a thin beam. Sarlish sprang from his chair with fantastic speed and scuttled between his legs, bringing him down. Ella leaped over the Terran and caught the gnome with a flying tackle. Sarlish hissed and clawed. She twisted at his neck in sheer self-defense, and suddenly the thin spine snapped and Sarlish kicked once and was still.

"Nice going!" Flandry scrambled to his feet. With a quick motion, he peeled off the face mask. "Too hot in this damned thing. All right, did you find our princess?"

"This way." There was a swift cold glad-

ness in the girl. She bent and picked up the dead guard's blaster. "I'll show you. But can we—?"

"Not by ourselves. But I've signalled Chives. Got at a radio just before coming here. Though how he's going to find exactly where we are, I don't know. I've had to assume you'd succeeded—" Flandry zig-zagged to avoid a flock of screaming girls. "Wow! No wonder the duke has nonhuman servants here!"

"Behind that wall—we'll have to go around, through the hall," panted Ella.

"And be shot as we come? No, thanks!" Flandry began assembling scattered chairs and divans into a rough barricade before the wall. "Cut our way through, will you?"

Plastic bubbled and smoked as Ella's flame attacked it. Flandry went on: "I bluffed my way in here by saying I had to fetch someone. A girl told me where you'd been taken. Imagine the only reason I got away with it is that no man would dare come in here unless he had orders from Alfred himself. But now there's the devil to pay, and I only hope Chives can locate us in time and not get himself blown out of the sky." He looked along the barrel of his blaster, down the arched length of the room to the rest of the suite. "Here they come!"

A troop of guards burst into sight. Flandry set his blaster to needle beam—that gave maximum range, but you had to be skillful to hit anything at such a distance. One of the men toppled. A curtain of fire raged before the others. The heat of it scorched his face. He picked off another man, and another. But the rest were circling around, getting within wide-beam range, and one shot could fry him. "Get that wall cut!"

"**H**ERE goes!" Ella jumped back as the circle she had burned collapsed outward. A drop of molten plastic stung her skin. The barricade burst into flame as a beam caught it. She tumbled through the hole, heedless of its hot edges, and Flandry followed her.

The girl inside crouched against the wall, mouth open with terror. She was dark, with a pretty, vacuous face that

showed the Imperial blood. "Lady Megan?" snapped Flandry.

"Yes," she whimpered. "Who are you?" "At your service, your Highness—I hope." Flandry sent a wide beam out through the hole in the wall. A man screamed his agony. The agent reflected bitterly how many brave folk—probably including Ella and himself—were dead because a spoiled brat had wanted a new kind of thrill.

The door swung inward. Ella blasted as it did, and there was a roar of disintegrating flesh and bone and armor. Flandry heaved a sofa up against the sagging door. Poor protection—they could only hold out for minutes.

He turned a sweating, smoke-blackened face to the princess. "I take it you know the duke kidnapped you, your Highness?" he asked.

"Yes," she whined. "But he wasn't going to hurt me—"

"So you think! I happen to know he intended to kill you." That wasn't exactly true, but it served its purpose. If they lived, Megan wouldn't get him in trouble for endangering her life. She even began babbling something about a reward, and Flandry hoped she would remember it later. If there was a later.

He had one advantage. The duke could not use heavy stuff to blow them all up without killing his prisoner. But— He passed out three gas masks.

The outer wall glowed. A circle was being cut from it, big enough to let a dozen men through at a time. Flandry and Ella could blast the first wave, but the next would overpower them.

Smoke swirled heavy and bitter in the room. It was hot, stinking of sweat and blood. Flandry grinned crookedly. "Well, darling," he said, "it was a nice try." Ella's hand stroked his hair, briefly.

Something bellowed outside. The walls trembled, and he heard the rumble and crash of falling masonry. Outside, the noise of blasters and bullets grew to a storm.

"Chives!" whooped Flandry.

"What?" asked Megan faintly.

"Salade of Alfred au naturel with Chives," burbled Flandry. "You must meet Chives, your Highness. One of nature's

noblemen. He—how the hell did he do it?"

A volcano growled outside, the walls glowed red, and then there was silence.

Flandry pulled the burning sofa away and risked a glance into the corridor. It was a ruin, scorched and tumbled by the full impact of a naval blaster cannon. The attacking troopers had simply ceased to exist. A series of smashed walls showed open sky far beyond. Hovering in the wreckage was his own lean speedster.

"Chives," said Flandry in awe, "merely swooped up to the fortress at full drive, blew his way in with the guns and bombs, and opened up on the duke's men."

The airlock swung wide, and a green head looked out. "I would recommend haste, sir," said Chives. "The alarm is out, and they have fighting ships."

He extended a ladder. Flandry and the girls tumbled up it, the airlock clanged shut behind them, and the boat took off with a yell. Behind it, a small cruiser lifted from the military field.

"How did you find us?" gasped Flandry. "I didn't even know where the harem was myself when I called you."

"I assumed there would be fighting, sir," said Chives modestly. "Blasters ionize the air. I used the radiation detectors to fix your direction as I approached." He set the boat on autopilot and moved over to the tiny galley.

Flandry studied the viewscreens as the planet fell beneath them. "That cruiser—" he muttered. "No—look at the radar—we're distancing it. This can of ours has legs. We'll make it to Varrak all right."

He glanced about the cabin. Ella was trying to soothe a hysterical Megan. She looked up at him for a moment, and he saw that there was glory in her eyes.

"Our only worry," he said, "is that dear Alfred might rise in open revolt now that he's exposed. If that happens, Merseia would probably move in and we'd have a general war on our hands."

Chives looked up from the stove. "His Grace was directing the assault on your stronghold, sir," he said. "When I fired on the soldiers, I fear I took the liberty of disintegrating the duke as well. Does her Highness take sugar or lemon in her tea?"

THE VIZIGRAPH

(Continued from page 3)

Good letter column in the March issue. The illos go to (1) Don Allen; (2) Claude Hall; (3) Ron Ellik (I correspond with the latter of the last two.) That's what I get for not knowing the correct usage of a word . . . I always thought that 'latter' meant the last, but I see it means the last of two. Me and my Abbott pocket dictionary.

Sincerely,

DON WEGARS

CLASS IN THE CLOUDS

38 Blendworth Crescent
Leigh Park,
Havant, Hants, England

Dear Sir,

The March issue of PLANET has just come into my possession, and in it, to my surprise, is a critical letter from my far away brother. I am not averse to sound criticism from anyone but I rather anticipated criticism from the other known Portsmouth Fan to be personal. However, as his arguments have been put forward in public, I feel bound to reply through the same way so that, if I can satisfactorily refute his pessimistic views, others who may be interested will know how the matter panned out.

Incidentally—before proceeding to the subjects in hand—I am amazed at the general dearth of criticism from other fans—also at how everybody who has been good enough to write to me has missed the inane concept that I inserted in my letter for the sole purpose of instigating a healthy argument. In my own mind I feel certain that people who understand Science Fiction enough to enjoy it must have some knowledge of the sciences involved; otherwise how can we be distinguished from mere run-of-the-mill Fiction Fans?

The first, rather bald, statement that I have to contend with is that Venus' atmosphere is well nigh devoid of everything other than carbon dioxide. Nobody who has viewed, or seen a photograph, of our sister planet's spectrum would ever deny that this is true for the upper layers; but who is to say what lies beneath, and who can refute that carbon dioxide is composed of those two elements absolutely essential to our type of life form. Without delving into the reasoning of organic chemistry, carbon, with silicon as a shaky runner up, are the only atoms capable of building into a living organism. Oxygen needs no explanation. From this admittedly brief resume I personally think that it is very encouraging to find these

(Continued on page 91)

DAWN OF THE DEMIGODS

By RAYMOND Z. GALLUN

As unheralded as ghosts, but as significant as a new dawn of history, there came to Earth from distant Ganymede's glowing crescent—three micro-androids, minuscule beings, carrying the moot treasure of immortality.

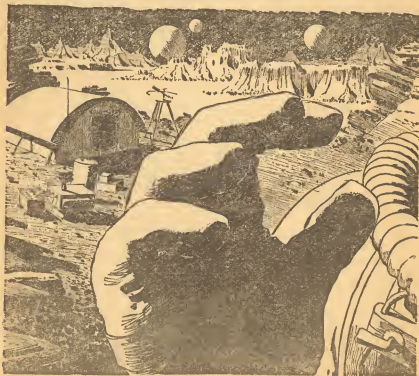
SOMEbody invented the first locomotive. Then came the nuclear bomb. I guess that people were somewhat scared of newness both times.

Mostly, it has been worse ever since.

World War III was also before my day. But then fear, the protective emotion, played a reasonable part. So no cities were actually vaporized. But our side came out the victors with bombers so high-flying that

they were already atom-propelled rocket ships of space. We had artificial satellites circling the Earth, and a fortress on the Moon.

I missed the first exploration of the solar system, too. There was hot Mercury, carbon dioxide-smothered Venus; Mars and its ruins and quiet colors; and what was left of Planet X, whose people destroyed the Martians in war, though their planet itself



Illustrated by Herman Vestal



The eyes of the Atlas who was our friend stared . . . stared fearfully at the message being inscribed so mysteriously on his plastic helmet.

got blown all to bits in the same struggle, its fragments now being known as the asteroids.

The moons of Jupiter and Saturn were also invaded by men, as were the frozen-methane-and-ammonia blizzards of Uranus and Neptune, and the frigid mountain peaks of Pluto, farthest world of all.

There were always yarns about "Little Men" and whatnot, of course. Yet no contemporary intelligent races were found across space. There were just queer skeletons and dried up corpses millions of years old. Rusting on Mars, or floating free and broken among the Asteroids, were the remains of inventions, and other cultural evidences. Space ships had wandered as far as Pluto during those past ages, too; and various relics were left on this sphere or that. Scientific study of these things meant more speed for our technical progress in medicine, atomics, metallurgy, almost anything you could mention.

Three cheers for us, and wasn't progress wonderful? But I guess plenty of folks felt dumb and slow and confused.

I, Charles Harver, was born in Chicago, March 9th, 2014. But in my earliest, murky memories, Earth was only a place known from television, picture books, and the nostalgic remarks of my parents. We had a house and a flower and vegetable garden under a transparent airdome of dark blue plastic. The sun would shine among the stars for what I heard was fourteen days; then, for another two weeks the solar lamps would burn in the dome top.

The region where we lived was called the spaceward lunar hemisphere. Earth never shone there, but life was good. There were other kids, and school, and the usual dreams about being a bold space wanderer, speeding out to find unimagined marvels.

Dad was a technician in the research labs, just a few miles from our house by tube train. I could see the walls of the buildings in the bleak volcanic distance.

Dad used to pretend he was wrestling with me. "Charlie," he'd say, "a kid better grow up tough and flexible these days. Not mean but rugged—ready for anything. Don't ever go soft on me, Charlie, with all the temptations of modern comforts. You know one thing the labs are looking

for, *already*? Yeah, a way to reach the planets of the stars! Maybe a means—and an engine powerful enough—really *will* be invented to force a shortened, interdimensional path across the light-years if the structure of space itself doesn't burst under test! Keep your head down, kid! The work is much too dangerous to be conducted on the densely populated Earth. There could be an awful blow."

Dad was a big, dark man. Talking like that, he looked thrilled and scared.

DAD used to bring Dr. Shane Lanvin out to our house to enjoy Mother's cooking, which, even considering the aid of a fine automatic kitchen, was something special. Dr. Lanvin was a wispy little man with a ragged blond mustache. He was much older than Dad; though Mom used to say that even if he was a famous scientist, he was part child in his interests; that he liked even toys.

"I always did enjoy things in miniature, Lillian," he'd admit.

Dr. Lanvin was an instrument specialist, which meant designing and assembling parts that you could scarcely see, so small were they. Once he made me a toy. It was a ball that absorbed the energy of sunshine, and rolled after me wherever I went, in the plastic-sealed, tree-lined streets of the lab staff housing area. Following the sounds of my footsteps, it seemed half alive. Maybe it was a forerunner of all that was to come.

Once Dr. Lanvin showed me a bit of quartz, like a grain of sand. It was mounted in a little round case, fitted permanently to a powerful pocket microscope. Through the scope you could see one flat face of the quartz grain, glinting. Carved on it, unmistakable, were horizontal rows of symbols.

My spine tingled. "Did you engrave them, Dr. Lanvin?" I demanded. I was eight or nine, then.

"I could have, Buggsie," he answered, using my nickname. "With a micro-manipulator and a diamond chip. Only I didn't."

"Then who did?" I pursued.

"I wish I knew," he replied. "A friend of mine collected some two thousand of these tiny, non-ferrous—not iron-bearing,

that is—meteors, floating free in the asteroid belt, and mailed them to me. My microscope revealed this unusual one. The symbols are about the same as those used by the beings of Planet X in their full-sized inscriptions, before some vast nuclear charge from Mars blew up their world. But no man can read such writing. That's about all I know—yet."

This remained almost our only information on this particular subject, until years later.

We might all have been blown to Kingdom Come there on the Moon, had any of the lab experiments gotten seriously out of control. There were minor blasts. But I lived out my time there safely. I even worked in those labs myself for several months, and by then even the stars seemed technologically nearer. Dr. Lanvin had left the Moon, accepting a professorship at the University of Chicago, and it was soon decided that I'd be sent there to complete my education.

Mom said an odd thing as she and Dad saw me off at the Tycho spaceport: "I wish we were going there, too, Charlie. I wish we had a little country place, far off from everything, and a cow and some chickens."

"That's a primitive mouthful for a modern woman, with no idea of modern farming, let alone such an antique setup," Dad chuckled. "Well, sometimes I yearn for simplicity, too. We're weak, slow-adjusting characters, left a little behind by the onrush of the times. So long, Charlie, watch yourself. It seems funny that I, an Earthian, have a son who'll actually have to get used to Earth."

Yes, that turned around situation, characteristic of our era, seemed odd. I was nervous about my big, sophisticated, native planet, as if it was an alien world! As a youngster, men had kidded me that I couldn't even endure its huge gravity!

The new university outside Chicago proper was beautiful. As arranged, I went to live at Dr. Lanvin's house. I adjusted to Terra, even though, within twenty-four hours of my arrival, there was a catastrophe that couldn't have happened in a previous age.

A freighter coming from Mars to the Chicago spaceport, couldn't decelerate. No-

body knows completely what errors of human stupidity were committed aboard the doomed ship under the goad of panic; but the *Venetian Prince* came down like a colossal meteor, fortunately in almost open country miles from the port. Yet a town of fifteen thousand nearby was wiped out. At Dr. Lanvin's house we felt the shock wave and the hot wind. The western horizon glowed red. No doubt a crater will stand for ages at the site of the crash.

As I watched from Doc's dooryard, all the loved romance of space and the future seemed to turn sour on me.

"Disasters that afflict innovations always affect people about the same, Charlie," Doc breathed heavily, not calling me Buggsie, now. "Train wrecks, the sinking of an ocean liner, the crash of a great plane. Now a space ship destroying a town. The magnitude just gets bigger, more terrible. There'll be an investigation, terror, grief, complaints; laws will be changed. But wider and better interplanetary travel will go marching on, with everything else."

I got in on the ground floor of Dr. Lanvin's work in advanced robotics. Robot devices had been used for various purposes for many years. But Doc had invented some much improved ones. I tried handling several. Then, like part of my obscure destiny, the chance came to really prove one of them.

FIRE broke out in an unrenovated warehouse near the edge of the city one night. Doc and I drove to the scene in his atocar. There was a lot of inflammable and possibly explosive material. Someone shouted that a watchman had been overcome by smoke inside the building.

"Get him out, Charlie," Doc said. "Your body is more agile than mine; your control of an artificial one will be the same."

Sitting in the car, I put the control helmet over my head. In it there was no old fashioned television screen, and no complicated guide levers. What the helmet did was detect and sidetrack the motor impulses from my brain, broadcasting their pulsations by short wave radio to the robot, which I thus guided as if it were my own form. Similarly, sensory impressions were radioed back to the helmet, there to be

reconverted into impulses directly perceptible to the sensory centers of my brain, without the intervention of my eyes, ears, and other sense organs.

So, in effect I was living in a shape not handsome in a human way, stronger than my own, and far less limited. Like a demon I stepped out of the rear seat of the atocar on asbestos-shod feet. Propelled by steel muscles energized by a motor drawing current from an atomic battery, I walked past less intricately robotized fire-fighting equipment. Through smoke that would have strangled an unprotected man, I climbed a ladder and went through a window from which a plume of flame belched, I felt no inconvenience whatsoever. There was a thrill in that—like being something super.

After that I was a bit lost. But a voice growled instructions near me—in the car, that is; I had almost forgotten that I was really there, and not in the blazing warehouse. Muffled and harrassed, it reached my own ears through the control helmet:

"Walk your robot inward, kid, for cripes sake! Follow a beam if there's no floor left! There'll be a little office room . . ."

I knew that it must be some chief of the fire fighters who was giving me directions.

With flames all around, I—or the machine—scrambled along a steel support, and through an opening in an inside wall. Flames had not penetrated there, and automatically I saw through the opaque smoke by radio waves sent out by, and bouncing back to eyes that belonged to the robot; parabolic antennas, they were. The images were visual and unblurred, and lacked only color.

I found the office, and the man who had collapsed there. I pressed an oxygen mask from my insulated pack over his face, and wrapped him in an asbestos blanket that I carried.

"Rush to the main door of the building, kid!" the voice growled again. "I think the wall of flame is less deep there!"

Doing it was a cinch, though I went through a hundred feet of pure fire in two great leaps. I dropped the guy on a stretcher outside the door. Let the medics work on him. I had to remind myself that he had been rescued, not by me, but by a product of science.

Back at the car I made the robot polish the soot off itself with a cloth, and then climb into the rear seat to assume an inert position for transport, again. After that, I removed the helmet.

"Well, Charlie, another foretaste of the future, eh?" Doc said from behind the wheel. "Make way for tomorrow . . ."

"Yeah," I grunted raggedly. "Like being more than human."

The guy who had been giving me directions still stood beside the car. Somehow, I sensed that our innocent remarks were wrong things to say in his presence. I studied him from my six-feet-three height. Growing up in low lunar gravity, a fellow shoots up amazingly.

His face, topping a massive body, was beefy and rough and kind; but now there was fury in it. He was like a tame bear after being baited and confused for too long. And he'd just been through some nerve wracking minutes of responsibility for a man's life.

"Okay, kid," he rumbled. "You and science saved that man. Thanks. Otherwise, it's all the same. Tomorrow, and more gadgets! Nothing stays put so a guy can understand it! The world just rushes on, till maybe not even gravestones mean anything anymore—except when a spaceship rubs out a town, killing my brother, his wife, and their four kids, among the others! Pretty soon you think that the whole universe is going to fall apart, with all the junk in it, and that there aren't going to be any real folks anymore! When all you wanted was peace for your family. Then you get all mixed up, and want to kill and smash whoever and whatever makes this so. Damn! Dammit all! . . ."

I held my hands poised to grab him if he tried to jump me. Only his grief kept me from calling him a fool. Yes, he might have attacked me, except that now he went all to pieces. Big sobs wracked him.

Doc and I didn't have to do anything because two cops came and led him away.

Doc shrugged sadly. "Neurasthenia. It's getting commoner, Charlie," he said. "A straw just broke another camel's back. Our friend has had a tough time. Besides, he's one of the slow ones. Slow to adjust and grow with his civilization. Oh, he'll prob-

ably straighten out. Or the cerebral specialists will fix his brain. He'll be an easy going, untroubled individual. Is it right and democratic to tamper with a man's mind? Well, would you let him be insane, poignantly miserable, for keeps?"

Again I had a primitive qualm. The Earth was all around me, strange, teeming, overpopulated in spite of colonies across space. The crowd, jubilant over the robot's demonstration, was all around us. But I bet that every one of those people was at least a little bewildered by the times.

"Let's drive home, Doc," I urged sharply.

II

AS WE whizzed along, Dr. Lanvin smirked at me like a sly elf. "To what our poor friend complained about, I owe much," he remarked. "Consider my birthdate, January 23rd, 1932. It's now 2033. Yes, I'm a hundred and one, though I look and feel fifty by old standards. It's common enough. Wizardry? No. Let's face facts, Charlie. Something like immortality has been sneaking up on the human race for well over a century. First, diseases were conquered one by one. Meanwhile, surgery, replacing worn out organs with new ones grown artificially, went far ahead. Hormone therapy was developed. The final degenerative disease, senility, is proving to be just as conquerable as cancer. Remove its causes—accumulation of minerals and certain fatty acids among other things, and tune up the machine—and it just isn't there anymore!"

Doc paused for breath, then went on:

"Yes, there's plenty that we don't yet know about the wonderful mechanism of the human body. But we don't need to know everything to keep it living on and on. Because, with a little help, it restores itself. The trouble with our viewpoint is that death has been the destiny of all life on Earth for so long that it seems like an inviolable tradition. A silly attitude, don't you think? Now, have I disoriented you some more, Charlie? Don't be embarrassed. I feel somewhat that way myself. Maybe your mood is right for me to go a step further into the murky Destiny of Man, eh?"

My hide was tingling with something like dread. But I was eager. "I'm ready for anything, Doc."

We got back to his old house under the trees of the campus. From a cabinet in his quiet living room he took a plastic box. In it was a small, oblong bar of pinkish substance that wriggled slightly, as if it were animated.

"Touch it," Dr. Lanvin commanded.

I obeyed. The stuff was warm, and in response to contact with my finger, it writhed violently. "Unh—what in hell!" I grunted.

"It's something a big commercial laboratory managed to produce for abstract reasons," he answered. "It isn't any one substance, but its structure does include quite a few complex silicone compounds. Chemically it's not static. Processes and structural changes are going on inside it constantly. Its microscopic texture is cellular, like animal tissue. Pour, say, sugar dissolved in water on it, with the addition of certain salts, and it absorbs the solution slowly, along with oxygen from the air, to produce a kind of tissue-combustion, heat and movement. But it can convert sunlight, or simple heat from an outside source, or electricity, into motion, too. And it grows. Cut a piece of it off, and that will grow, too, as if reproduction had occurred. So—would you call it life of a sort? It's a lot more rugged than common life. Here, I'll show you, Charlie..."

Doc picked up a small soldering tool. When its point glowed red hot he held it close to that pinkish oblong. It did not recoil from the heat. Instead, as if impelled by some inherent automatism or instinct, it curled itself around the tool, and, hissing softly, seemed to enjoy the warmth. When Doc switched off the current, it uncoiled itself as if in disappointment. It wasn't burned.

"Cold it is equally resistant," Doc remarked. "Especially when its vital fluid, moistening it inside and out, is changed to something with a lower freezing temperature than water. Alcohol, for example, or liquefied air or ammonia gas. Then its chemistry, and the flow of energy continue on a different temperature plane, for it is supremely adaptable, Charlie."

Dr. Lanvin's sly expression matched the chill along my back.

"Okay," I growled. "Now tell me what you're really thinking."

He shrugged. "Oh, nothing definite, Charlie. Someday reaching the stars in another figurative sense, maybe. As is, this stuff isn't of much use. Call it 'protoplast' as its creators do—a tougher, upstart brother of protoplasm—life. It isn't molded. But what if, in a vastly improved form, it could be someday?"

I frowned. "An animal?" I questioned. "Artificially made? Or—a man? An android, that is? Pure fantasy, of course, yet, A robot, with a robot's ruggedness, but made completely in human form. Servants maybe?"

Doc Lanvin's mild grin turned crooked. "Servants?" he challenged. "Is that all? What if we were living the last century of man's existence as original man? No, I don't necessarily mean the often dreamed-up possibility of a robot conquest of humanity by force! But what of the 'improved model' principle, applied by humans to themselves, with the transfer of mind and ego to a body that could live without harm in the cold vacuum between the planets, or in an inferno; a body unaging, and destructible only by absolute violence? No, Charlie, this development must normally be a long ways ahead. But what if?"

A cold tingling had started around my heart, spreading inexorably to the tips of my fingers, toes, and tongue.

"Doc, I don't know," I said slowly. "To the flexible of viewpoint—wonderful. But it might be the ultimate shock to those who want tomorrow to be understandably and reliably like today and last year. To them it might be a hell; the death of everything reasonable, and a catastrophe to resist with all the weapons in the modern armory, and with the last fury of dying brain and muscle."

"I thought you'd react something like that," Doc sighed.

My laugh was unsteady. "Then why don't scientists stop digging? Nature can bite back."

"We can't stop, Charlie. Like everything, man is part of nature. He was given wits and curiosity to know the whys and where-

fores of everything. It's like a religion—trying to learn a little more about, and get a little closer to, Whatever It Is That Keeps The Cosmos Running. Or you can say that all of man's works are works of nature, with him as the tool. That is our oneness with the universe which we've got to grow with. The fears are often childish. I feel the scare, too, Charlie, but I think you're like me."

"I hope I am," I stated.

"Thanks. Go to bed, Charlie. We've gabbled enough for now."

"Nix," I answered. "I think that maybe you have been leading up to some mention of your own work, Doc."

DR. LANVIN'S fingers tightened on the arm of his chair. "All right, Charlie," he said. "Down at dustgrain size is my own segment of the universe—my miniature region to explore—as others mean to explore the planets of the stars. It's a weird zone where familiar physical laws are curiously altered in their effects by relativity. Humans can't go there in their own flesh, at least not yet. But I believe that there may be a simple if difficult way to build a tiny metal proxy, operated the same as you operated that fire robot. Then, perhaps some compelling mysteries will be solved."

"For instance?" I prompted.

Doc nodded toward a photograph on the wall beside the old fashioned picture of his former wife. The first photograph showed his tiny pink meteor. Its much magnified hieroglyphics seemed to wink at us enigmatically.

"How that writing got there," Doc answered. "And now, more. Government authority has asked me to help, Charlie. From Ganymede, largest moon of Jupiter, comes a report of a cache of tools in a chest that itself is of almost microscopic dimensions. Finding it, several men were afflicted with dizziness and fainting. One died. Autopsy revealed many little seared, reddish lines crisscrossing inside the cortex of his brain. Also, in the asteroid belt, several space ships have gone out of control, the finest parts of their most delicate control mechanisms severed as if by intense heat."

"Beings," I breathed awedly. "The im-

plication is clear but crazy. Why, a being no smaller than a rat couldn't have human intelligence. The molecules of matter remain of the same size. Building a truly sentient brain at such an extreme of smallness, using those same molecules, would be like trying to make fine pottery out of coarse sand!"

"Who said anything about molecules?" Doc demanded almost angrily. "When—just for instance—the flow of far smaller electrons has been the soul of complicated calculating devices for a century? But who knows anything? Maybe, before long, I'll let you in on my project, if you have the courage and interest. But you need more general education. Now, not another word. Go to bed. Answering your whys and whats, I'd be mostly guessing, too."

I went to my room where I lay for hours with a tingle in my guts, aware of the frosty stars, the squawking katydids, the universe big and little, and buzzes from Doc's workroom. And I thought of how the human body conformed to the laws of machines. Hence it was a natural robot. It was near dawn before I slept.

Thereafter, life went on in the sunshine and shadow of a campus, idyllic and gentle, masking unrest. There were my instructors and the classrooms and labs, and the faces of my contemporaries, easy going young faces, matching a languid attitude of body coupled with latent strength, as a cat's languidness is coupled with the capacity to galvanize into lightning speed. For them the times held a pleasant spark of fright, and the rich red meat of coming triumph. In all fairness, I was one of them.

Minden, Fellows, Bowhart, Griswold, Scharber, and the others—the rhythm and meaning of their voices and words was usually the same:

"Hi, Charlie! How was the astrogation quiz?" Or: "Yesterday, I rocketed the training ship two thousand kilometers over Lake Michigan, and it was a cinch! . . ." Or: "Could any course be dopier than this 'Suggested Techniques For Establishing Friendly Relations With Possible Extra-Terrestrial Intelligences?'" Or: "So long, Charlie! I'm going out to help build Pallas City for the asteroid miners! . . ."

Or it might be Mars, Venus, Mercury,

or the well remembered Moon, where huge, fantastic starcraft were already in the blueprint stage.

Yes, all this was my life, too; though already it seemed half diverted to another, much stranger destiny.

AND there was Janice Randall whom I first spotted in Astrogation Lecture.

But I really met her in the company of George who had a special room up in the top of the University Library. It was an eerie place, suitable for such an entity. George was more than an electronic calculator; he was a Giant Brain. He was also a student's and research worker's oracle. You could ask him questions.

One day, with Doc Lanvin's remarks sharply in mind, I went up there and waited my turn at George's microphone.

"Can a true android, with all the human attributes of mind and feeling, be made, George?" I asked.

George rustled inside his unpretentious black cabinet and replied in a bass voice:

"I believe that it can and will be done. Like space travel, it is part of the natural course of history."

"What is the most difficult phase of doing so?" I enquired further. "Building the brain?"

"No. Building the brain should be relatively simple. Giving an android a consciousness, an awareness of self, should be much more difficult. Philosophers have had trouble even defining consciousness."

I chanced a third question, the answer to which I already knew: "Don't you have a consciousness, George?"

"It is understood that no means yet exists to provide Earthly mechanisms with such a thing," George replied evenly. "I am no more aware than the first crude adding machine thinking out the sum of five and seven. A question to me merely sets a search and a reasoning process for a reply in motion. It is not necessary that I *know* that I do this."

Someone spoke from behind me: "Unaware thought. It even happens in our own subconscious minds. But it's hard to believe that George doesn't know his own reality. He's so human."

I turned. It was Jan Randall, coloring

a little. "Oh, I'm sorry Mr. Harver, I didn't mean to eavesdrop," she said.

"Eavesdrop?" I chuckled. "There was nothing private about my question. Go ask yours, I'll wait out of earshot."

"I haven't any," she answered with a smile. "I come here often just for the mood. This place feels like a temple; as if God and all nature were here. George isn't much of all that, but he seems the best contact. Now, shall we both laugh?"

"Let's feel awed and humble, instead," I replied.

After a pause, I asked lightly: "George, is it all right for Janice Randall and I to have dinner together?"

George was small. Always, he refused to give out social advice. "This, I am not permitted to answer," he rumbled.

Jan and I laughed gayly together as we turned to leave. Jan was unobtrusive, but very pretty. Her hair was light brown, her features were fine, her nose turned up, her height reached to the center of my chest. And she had her eyes on a spacewoman's career.

From beside the door a pair of slightly fanatical eyes under a high forehead smirked at us. The jaw was strong; the smile was crooked, humorous, gentle.

"Hi, Cope," I greeted. "What brings you here?"

"This I have to watch, Harver," he answered. "The machine telling the man—already. Screwballs! Where will it end?"

"Who was that?" Jan asked as we were going down stairs.

"An English-Lit classmate of mine," I answered. "One who believes that all virtue is the past's. Call him the conscience of the human race. Armand Cope."

Little hard glints showed in Jan's eyes before she said, "Oh," mildly, and laughed.

After dinner I took her to meet Dr. Shane Lanvin. Six months later he said to both of us:

"Like a hiring officer picking a starship crew, I have to look for guts, wits, and certain other qualities, in prospective helpers for what I am attempting. There may be danger. And I wouldn't want anyone to go soft and back out later. So here's your chance—part-time for the present. But I want a final yes or no."

Mild Doc Lanvin could be hard. But he knew Jan's quality. She had taken courses of study and training, of which nine-tenths of the students were masculine. Her reactions to tests for quick thinking, emotional ruggedness, and physical stamina, were all good. Moreover, she had excelled in the study of instrument making, with which we had both occupied much time. Her manual precision was better than mine.

"On your terms, count me in, Dr. Lanvin," she said quietly.

"Even without Jan, I think I'd be a foregone conclusion, Doc," I told him.

So, with every minute that we could spare from our regular studies, we were working with the great specialist of the miniature, trying to push another frontier downward into The Small. Doc had his duties to the University, but he had his nights and weekends, and the additional drive of the odd and grim reports which had already come from deep in space.

Do you know what a micro-manipulator is? It begins with a simple, high powered microscope. But in its field of view are mounted little slide rods, fitted with hand operated vernier screws, by which they can make movements so fine that a gesture of a thousandth of a centimeter may seem the widest of swings. Attached to the slide rods are forceps, and measuring and cutting instruments, some too small to be visible to the unaided eye.

Under one microscope Doc had even set up a real, power driven lathe, a quarter-inch long. Under another was a sort of assembly area. There, a shiny robot, half an inch high, with all the intricate control and circuits combined into it, was taking form. Cables were as fine as spiderwebs.

III

REPRODUCING that first robot in triplicate was easier than it might seem, for when we had set up all the small machinery to make the parts, duplication was almost automatic. But assembly remained a tedious chore. On the other hand, the control hoods were almost of the standard type used for much larger automatons.

Still, it was eight months before Doc announced on a Saturday afternoon: "Step

one completed. Now to repeat in step two! . . ."

We had test proved all three robots as soon as each was ready. But now that each of us possessed a metal proxy, we could all go as a group on that first step down into The Small.

Sitting in chairs in Doc's workroom we put on our control hoods. Then, sensory illusion seemed to make us leave our real bodies behind. The top of the work table spread suddenly around my tiny, artificial eyes becoming a vast, cluttered plain. The ceiling was our sky. The fluorescent lights were multiple suns. Doc and Jan were shining, man-tall monsters, exactly like myself. I couldn't tell them apart, until manner of speech betrayed Jan.

"Look at us!" she shouted gleefully in a thin, buzzing voice from a tympanum in her chest. "Coming this far is like dropping into an abyss, half way to the bottom! And see the *real* us! Great, hooded colossi, sitting as if asleep, in the distance!"

"Yeah, I know, Honey," was all I said. In this moment of half realizing a goal, Doc's love of miniature things became tense impatience.

"All right, my worthies!" he buzzed. "Supper and being ourselves again is only a few hours away. So let's get started on tougher step two!"

We hurried to a clear plastic box (of building-size to us now) and inside its drilled doorway our materials were waiting.

There were the roughed out beginnings of other micro-manipulators, except that now, for work on pieces smaller than the width of a single light wave, the microscopes would have to be of the electron variety. Their parts had to be polished and fitted together here; for even that was labor beyond the direct doing of a man in his own flesh. Now we had to finish a whole array of super-fine micro tools and equipment—lathes, heaters, shapers of glass.

Not until then could the real work proceed—making robots of which only the largest pieces yet existed, still in the rough. They would be robots bearing the same size-relationship to our present half-inch selves, as those same selves bore to human beings!

"Specks, dust particles, dimensions on

the order of the smallest insects," Doc's new self buzzed. "Down near the barrier, the limit of smallness, beyond which metals become, by relativity, too hard, and too coarse-grained to be shaped. Small objects are always relatively stronger than large ones. Yes, you'd have to decrease the strength of materials in proportion to size to achieve a constant there. Take an ant, far smaller than a man, but able to lift many times his own weight because the substance of his muscles is relatively tougher!"

"Well, power for polishing comes first, doesn't it?" I said, and we went to work.

The days went. Tediously our work progressed. Another spring came, and we lived two lives, with almost two sets of identities. There were classes and friends, and walks around the campus for Jan and me. Then we were down again, where flecks of lint floating in the air looked like twisted twigs, and where metal surfaces were difficult indeed to burnish.

One evening, with grim excitement in his voice, Doc gave us some news:

"Again the Government is asking us for a favor. Small space ship and everything provided! There have been more mysterious breakdowns of equipment, and strange illnesses reported. So we're going out to Ganymede! Sorry, check out of the U; get your gear together, tighten your belts—because this is it! See a justice, maybe, if that's in your minds. Take a few days off."

My hand tightened protectively on Jan's shoulder. Somehow, before the unknown, I felt that marriage would be like a shield for us both, though we were still pretty young.

"Time to get hitched, Jan," I said later. "If you've made up your mind. Or should we consult George?"

Her eyes twinkled with a flare of recklessness. She lowered her voice and mocked humorously: "This is a question which I am not permitted to answer. Unghh!"

FOR a few days we were away from Doc Lanvin. Our brief honeymoon was on the Moon with my folks. Jan's parents had died in a rocket crash years before. It was good to see Mom and Dad

and the old house again. Out beyond the sprawling buildings of the expanded labs, the skeleton of a huge hull was taking form. The stars, that meant, though the problem of overdrive, speeds greater than light, promised no early answer after all. A journey to the nearest stars would take a long, long time.

Within a week Jan and I were back on Earth, packing equipment. Armand Cope, whom I've mentioned, was one of those who came to bid us good-bye. His cynical mouth twisted as if he were both sorry for, and contemptuous of us.

"Maybe I was just born too late," he said. "I don't know just what you're after, but there are rumors. Well—honestly—keep safe."

"Thanks, Cope," I said.

"Yes, from me, too," Jan added gently. Then she threw a mild jibe at him: "Still trying to hold back tomorrow, Cope?"

Two guys I knew slightly, Bowhart and Scharber, were selected as crewmen for our ship, *The Intruder*.

"Bow and I are trained for simple space stuff, Charlie," Scharber said. "We won't stick our noses into this micro-robot business."

Scharber was broad and easy going. Bowhart was short and dark and serious.

Jan changed to the rough coverall, acceleration suit, and boots of a space wanderer. Maybe there was a regret for the difference, but it also brought a new jauntiness.

On a Sunday night our ship blasted off from the New Mexico desert. When our acceleration was completed, our ringlike hull began to rotate, to give us a centrifugal substitute for gravity. The outer silence closed in, and two months of monotonous journeying provided only a new setting for our efforts to build us metal forms that could stand beside an inscription on a sand-grain meteor as a man stands beside a monument. All of Doc's home workshop had been transferred to the *Intruder*. There, in the lab compartment, Doc, Jan and I sat hour after hour, wearing our control hoods, but living in metal bodies half an inch high that bent intently over an even far finer and more difficult craftsmanship.

We passed Mars' orbit without seeing the new man-made airdome cities among

the ruins. We saw nothing of the asteroid belt where fortunes were being made in metals from the heavy core of an exploded planet. Our quest had a different goal.

When we finished three super-micro-manipulators, we were better prepared to finish our tools and equipment to make parts. But our tedious job was less than half done when we arrived on Ganymede, cold and bleak, its tenuous atmosphere composed mostly of unbreathable methane gas.

Scharber brought us down on the landing stage of Port Hoverton. The settlement itself was under domes nearby.

And Jan said: "Hurdy-gurdies, Charlie! Hey, Doc! Scharber! Bow! Beer, music, games. A last fling, like the spacemen and miners! Let's have it!"

So we did for a few hours. Then we had us a good sleep. Then we found a guide. Boom Harlow, he called himself. Oldish, cheerful as a gravedigger.

"Sure I'll take you to where that little tool chest was found," he said. "If you stay, likely you'll never come back."

He blasted off with us for a thousand-mile jaunt in our ship, arcing above the stratified mists of half-congealed gases that hovered over the Ganymede landscape, and after we had landed at his command, he pointed out stone structures that looked both very old and very odd.

"There you are!" he said through the helmet phones of our space suits. "Maybe the last camp of the last survivors of Planet X, came here millions of years ago, before their world went flitt—before there were asteroids. But there's something here yet, I'm tellin' yuh! Now, after you pay me, I'll get my mono-wing out of your hold, and fly back to town, and I hope I won't stop long before I rocket back to Seattle. Keep alive if you can. So long."

Boom Harlow was gone, then, riding a jetted metal triangle high against the thin murk. The rest of us were left with the creeps and the wonder, and all the work we had to do.

THERE was an ancient shelter of glassy rock, metal-lined, and once sealed, for there was an airtlock. A dried, age-blackened form, its claws clenched, its queer,

vertical ribs sticking through the skin, was crumpled in one corner of the shelter. Around him was his gear—tools and weapons like those in museums. Perhaps no one had dared to take them, for a curse was supposed to be here.

But you could tell that he had been moved; and the even cones of dust on the floor showed that every bit of it had been carefully sifted, no doubt after prospector Jeffers had found that tiny box of glinting tools. He had shown the box to reliable people; but then, by later report, had somehow lost it.

The mummy was an Xian. With what sadness at the loss of a home world, had he awaited death under the bleak sky of Ganymede?

None of us spoke. At last Jan kicked dust over the corpse in a gesture of kindness.

"It may be safer in the ship," I offered.

Scharber and Bowhart had the *Intruder*, and the simpler wants of the rest of us to look after. Doc, Jan, and I kept working on the smaller micro-robots. But during an occasional spare hour we'd send our half-inch alter-bodies out into the cold to look around the ancient camp. We found nothing of interest except a splinter of diamond set in a metal shank. A cutting tool?

But within a month, certain phenomena began to appear inside the ship itself. As humans, we couldn't have noticed. But being half an inch high, it was different.

"Whispers in dark corners, and shadows that move," Jan said. "And tinkles. Or are spatial solitudes affecting my mind?"

We had just put down her control hood, so she was speaking as strictly herself. She looked alert and curious, not overwrought.

"I thought I noticed something vague, too," I admitted. "Funny, the ship is sealed. Even the air is constantly being filtered. But who's complaining if there are developments so soon?"

"It would be best even to sleep in our armor," Doc advised. "Scharber and Bowhart, too. Yes, I thought I heard a muttering and chirping. And just now, as we worked on that final assembly, I was sure I saw something hide in a bit of floss that was adrift in the air. But they never come too close; they just hover near and wait.

5—PLANET—Summer

And only miniature microphones, like those of our robots, could ever pick up the sounds they make."

My hide was coldly atingle again. "Darn!" I laughed. "Why does the idea of smallness and beauty always suggest fairyland, unreality? Small things are just as factual as large ones."

"Fairyland is a dream, Charlie," Jan chuckled. "Something which many of us in humdrum surroundings wish was so. But a yearning can sometimes be made to come true."

Though we felt that we were being watched, nothing came to interrupt our hard work. At last we won our fight with materials when we arrived at the microscopic size-level limit of the workability of metals. We now had three true micro-robots. They were like their half-inch creators, except that they had two coordinated sets of eyes—a lensed pair to see by ordinary light, and another pair, fitted with magnetic focusing rings, to see by the rebounding of electrons from objects at close range, where detail was less than the span of a single light-wave.

Step two, down into The Small, was made like step one. We used the same control-hoods, adjusted slightly, while we sat at our work table in the shop aboard the ship.

"To the bottom of the pit!" were Jan's final words as a woman.

We put on our hoods and plunged. It seemed infinite, this time. The gleaming walls and girders of the shop appeared as distant as planets. The surface on which we sprawled became pitted and scored from our new viewpoint. Polish was gone with magnification. An eerie, elfin ringing—perhaps the finer overtones of normal sounds—reached our tiny, tympanic ears.

We arose unsteadily. Our mechanical fingers joined, till we were a chain of three, moving toward the door of the box as a group. Then we were out on the undulating porcelain expanse of the table top. An air current, magnified to a hurricane by our minuteness, lifted us up till we floated free, still clutching each other's hands.

One peculiar thing about difference in size, is that the smaller an object is, the larger is its exposed surface in proportion

to volume and mass. That greater surface in relation to weight, allows the bombardment of passing air molecules to lift anything of dust-grain dimensions and density into wingless flight. It also can give a sense of helplessness, as if the atmosphere has become a treacherous medium full of irresistible currents.

We tumbled, we laughed, and would have been panic stricken except for knowing that our real selves were in normal circumstances. Nearby, the air seemed to shimmer. A gnarled thing floated close—floss, looking like a twisted tree-stump, to which clear ovoids clung—some common form of microscopic life. A chunk of mineral dust came drifting nearer, its sheared-off side glinting like quartz strata. Our two pairs of eyes still were not developed to distinguish colors. Yet Jan had reasons when she exclaimed in tinkling tones:

"Beautiful, truly beautiful! We came—we got here! In a sense, it's farther than the stars! But now what happens? Where are—they?"

"I don't believe they'll be long in coming," Dr. Lanvin said at last. "To write, to make tools, and to get into our sealed ship requires a capacity to think and plan. So, about us, they must be following a set purpose."

IV

TENSION mounted in me. As we drifted in the air, I looked at our human selves, seated giants in armor, cowed, brooding, and of legendary height. Here was a chance for a meeting with entities of another shape, flesh, and history. For the Martians and Xians seemed as extinct as the dinosaurs. Their artifacts and mummies were known; but their voices, movements, and real selves, were elusively beyond imagining.

In most of the old imaginative stories of the future, beings from another region spoke and thought like men. But a recent University course had pointed out how deeply different must be races sprung from wholly separate chains of evolution, not only in form but psychology; how there would be no hellos or similarity of custom on the other side, and how one must wait

with perfect self-control and mind utterly open, until an equal horror of alienness lessened in the alien beings, too. . . .

Jan said, "Look." The word was a single, flat, undramatic note. But we saw them. A mass of lint, gray to our colorblind vision, drifted toward us like twisted branches. Out of it, as from shrubbery, a dozen pair of eyes peered—lenses with a moist glint, fuzzed at the edges; here I thought not so much of lashes as of strange, misplaced antennae. The creatures were like rough-hewn dolls, with craggy, almost triangular heads. Yet these were not metal robots. Their skin was rough, as from a coarse binding of spherical cells, still small, yet almost large enough to be seen individually.

These beings possessed two arms and two legs. Yet, in still another way they were familiar. They took all their major details from the mummified bodies of the Xians, though those original Xians had been of human size. What strange retreat, or advance, was implied here?

I was trying to answer everything about tremendous mysteries at once. But I heard Jan tinkle out words matching my own awe:

"Charlie. . . . Doc. . . . Other intelligent beings. . . . Real. . . . See their clothing, and the metal devices at their belts and in their grasp. Seeing something completely hidden previously, is getting closer to the Ultimate Secret of the universe, isn't it?"

The little robot that represented Doc, holding onto the right hand of Jan's proxy as I clutched its left, had things to say, too, as we floated free, waiting for whatever would happen:

"Critters as little as these micro-robots of ours—and intelligent, and of flesh. But there couldn't be an intelligent brain working on the familiar human principle in so small a size. The molecules are simply too coarse to achieve such compactness. For that and other reasons, these strangers have to have flesh of some advanced form of protoplast with its possible flow of many types of energy, submolecular or electronic. This might well apply to brain function, making its countless patterns not inconceivable in an almost infinitely smaller package."

Just for a second, Doc paused, before he brought his topic to an avid point: "An-

droids," he said. "Micro-androids, or the equivalent, in relation to beings not human! Is that what they are? Then it is another demonstration of the advantages of this improved, lab-developed basis for life—venturing into space unprotected, being almost indestructible—even going down into The Small! . . . Or could it have evolved naturally?"

The chill in my mind sharpened and turned more eager. But now Dr. Lanvin's groping words faded out.

For, warily at first, our opposite numbers in this strangest of historic meetings, at last went into action. As a group, each with a purpose, they leapt from that floating mass of floss, their graceful, swimming motions in the air aided by the reaction of hot flickers from little jet-tubes they carried.

Swiftly, as if taking a citadel, they surrounded us, and held us in their explorative, yet strong clutch. Now was the moment of blundering, of attempted communication, across the great, mysterious gulf of difference.

Doc addressed them: "Now what do I do or say? Who learns whose way of conversing? Or would it be trite to think that you might be telepathic?"

Could these beings even recognize Doc's friendliness? Well, we were in for a surprise. They had a spokesman. Out of his thorax came a slurred buzzing, struggling to mimic human speech:

"Telepathy? No, Mister. Not so good for us with you people. Funny? Maybe. . . . Learn conversing? One can always learn more. . . . But we have been visiting Earth, mostly unnoticed—since—before—there were—men."

Here was English, idiomatic to the point of slang. Yet, to add an eeriness, there were pauses, as if the effort to think in a human manner was more difficult for this trained but outworldly psychology than the speech itself!

So, the simplicity of communication was like in some of the old, imaginative stories. Well, why not, if these little people had been haunting human stamping grounds for ages? Besides, could extra-terrestrial thought, dealing with common physical facts, be so totally different? That University course had exaggerated.

Doc cursed happily: "Dammit, things'll be easy, now!"

"Easy," came the cheerfully buzzed answer. But soon I suspected that a cheerful tone was pure mimicry of a human way, without, necessarily, a real, corresponding emotion. For now our escort gripped us roughly, and drew us along through the great gulf of air, using hand-held jet tubes for propulsion.

DOC'S shouted, "Hey, what goes on?" and my equivalent complaints, were ignored. Our escort broke in two, six of its members, including the leader, continuing to lift Doc, Jan, and me upward through the air inside our ship, the other six, bearing what looked like massive equipment, falling behind.

In the ceiling of our lab compartment there was a circle, still edged with the rough scale of a tool cutting with intense heat, and there was a hinged, circular door of metal. They had cut through the skin of our ship, and had installed an airlock, quite like our own variety in principle, yet so tiny that our human eyes had missed it entirely.

Helplessly we were drawn through it, and onward into the murky night of Ganyমে, over which Jupiter and his other scattered moons held sway. Our robot-selves of course did not feel the cold, which approached absolute zero. Nor apparently did our unarmored hosts. Nor did they seem compelled to breathe oxygen.

"Charlie! Doc!" I heard Jan call. "I hope they're not taking us too far! The radio control hoods, keeping us in contact with our micro-robots, here, are of limited range. We could lose the robots! . . ."

"Not very far," came the answer from the being who had spoken before. "But Kobolah—myself—says it makes no difference to you."

Perhaps that strange little monster meant to reassure us. By now I had him identified as an individual. The irregular filaments around his eyes were longer and paler than those of his henchmen.

A Ganymedeian wind wafted us along, our escort perhaps using it to cover distance, fighting it only as much as necessary, with their spitting jet tubes. Our course turned

downward into the shadows of knotty rock masses near the old Xian camp.

We went through another airlock, and into a tapered, cylindrical chamber. Figures like the others were there, craggy, yet obliquely charming in form. There was what must have been a propulsive mechanism, perhaps refined by ages of development, until matter was totally converted to energy.

And there was a crystal vat in which complicated grids were suspended in gelatin. Deep in the menisculous, pearly medium were shapes, hardly seen, though suggestive.

Kobolah spoke again: "You three even built small robots with great pains to pay us a visit. So we thought that maybe you should truly come. We shall see . . ."

I saw that odd, triangular head. I could fathom nothing from the eyes, except perhaps a cold interest. But I felt tricked and trapped. As far as our senses were concerned, we were here, not back in our ship. Forgetting that, we had been off-guard there!

Can a robot have a fearsome headache? Suddenly I had one. Dizziness and a blurring of consciousness was followed by panic. Suddenly I was back in the *Intruder*, frantically unfastening the helmet of my space armor, then casting off the control hood.

I staggered erect. Dr. Shane Lanvin grunted beside me. His usually mild face was contorted. Jan gave a thick cry, her gloved hand on her brow. Doc and she had also torn off their helmets and hoods.

I floundered to Jan, heard her say, "Charlie . . ."

Then I saw a hole, like a tiny cigarette burn, at the fabric-and-wire elbow joint of my armor's left arm.

"Scharber! Bowhart!" I yelled. It was a thin wheeze, I wished that they knew more about Doc's work so they could help us. My final awareness was of the rush of their footsteps.

Time became timeless. Then I had a sense of struggling upward toward light. The effort was mental. A minute might have passed, or a year. I had a body which seemed to turn lightly on a mattress of coarse sticks. I felt like myself, clothed in real flesh. The light around me might have been diffused sunshine, and I saw colors,

the familiar ones, plus what might be the indescribable paleness of ultra-violet, unknown to man as himself, and another nameless hue that perhaps was the sensory effect of electronic vision.

I didn't fully guess all this at once; but its ghost was in the back of my mind, and at the edge of panic.

I had sat up easily. I realized that I was still in the region of The Small. Once experiencing that environment denies any failure to recognize it later. Oh, there was the roughness of the glassy walls of the room, pleasingly decorated with geometric patterns like those of old tiles brought back to Earth from the asteroid belt. But I refer more to the insecure sense of buoyancy, of ease with which one might float in the air or recline upon it, after a tiny push at the floor. It is a feeling quite apart from the weightlessness experienced in space; and though there was certainly very little gravity here, too, the difference remained palpable. And now I even felt a tingling in my skin—the impact of molecules, perhaps, as they tried to lift and carry me away.

My body seemed to conform to such a dimensional plane. It was me with some details blurred or omitted. I was clad in stiff imitations of the slacks and shirt I had worn inside my space armor. My hands, rough in texture, lacked the fine hairs, as if they had been left out in a process of transformation. Was the stiff, wirelike hair on my head still black? I fumbled at my face. The nose, large jaw, and brow, seemed the same, except for a certain shortness and roundness, as in a doll-like simulacra. Corresponding to this was the length of lashes around my eyes—or had electronic sense-organs been added, necessary here for close vision?

Again I looked around the room. One wall was absent. But the square left for ventilation was crossed by interwoven diagonals—bars which must have been incredibly fine wire from another viewpoint.

Beyond this barrier was an egg-shaped chamber, so huge to my present minuteness that it was like a mountain valley, its sides curving up in shade and lushness; though through its vitreous, natural roof, light streamed. Everywhere, bright green foliage peeped over garden walls. Sometimes it was

shaggy and filamented, sometimes massy and spheroidal on thin stalks. Along streets rising in angular charm, were geometric masses in pastel tints, some unknown to man, before. There were cubes, pyramids, even spheres—buildings, obviously—yet of such simple oddity that a child might have designed them.

Water did not lie flat as in a lake, but gathered in great glistening dewdrops, burying a house or hill fantastically, but with startling beauty.

But all this moved with the daily life of a teeming civilization—living, manufacturing, buying and selling in the market place. The air was full of craggy shapes, same propelling themselves with arm and leg movement, others using jet rods. High on a slope there was a continuous electrical flicker, a bluish spark. Perhaps the furnace of a metallurgical process.

THE springy stuff on which I sat, gross as brushwood, would have been cotton wool to normal-sized human touch. Perhaps it was vegetable fibre of that order. Crouching near me was a girl, clad in coarse blue fabric which in reality would have shamed our finest textiles. The details of her face were simplified in a doll-like blurring of line. But still she was recognizable, even with the lashlike filaments around her eyes.

Somehow I still spoke with my lips. "Jan." My voice seemed a miniature bass bell. I crept to her side.

Her courage and sense of humor were intact.

Her laughter was a tinier bell. "I'm all right, Charlie. At least, yet. Maybe I just don't realize. One thing we've talked about has happened, hasn't it? You look sort of cute, Charlie, like a puppet in a show. Doc, too." Jan laughed again.

Beyond her, dressed like myself, was the reduced image of Dr. Shane Lanvin, though his inner self remained unchanged, his triumphant smile just faintly edged with doubt.

"Hi, Doc!" I greeted. "Congratulations for success in a venture which began with you. Now, for the record, let's hear your version of just what has happened."

He smirked good naturedly. "All right," he chuckled. "You can't get back to any

control hoods, our former human-size selves. I've tried. So our whole identities must have been transferred to these far smaller forms. Somewhere in our adventures the structure of each of our brains must have been exhaustively charted, down to the finest wavering of cell-filament, and the least variation of chemical state. Thus must have been captured every phase of our minds, memories, and personalities. This might have been done by something analogous to our focused radar or X-ray photography, penetrating deep, and making an instant record. From this record, the pattern of our brains must have been rebuilt, with all the complex channels of association and so forth, but in a totally different medium, capable of a far finer and more compact flow of energy than mere nerve impulses. In a brain of protoplast, I think it could happen."

"Loose ends still dangle," I chuckled. "For instance, I remember a machine called George, and a statement by him that consciousness, awareness of self, was even difficult to define. How about transferring that?"

Doc Lanvin shrugged. "Maybe the consciousness—the true self—is inherent in the brain channels, like the memory, and would also be transferred simply by copying them precisely," he said. "Or could the awareness be a kind of spark, capable of being captured and transported by an appropriate apparatus, as an electric spark can be captured in an electroscope? I don't know, Charlie. But I noticed some of the equipment carried by these Xians when they took us; and I thought of that."

Silence seemed to close in as Doc finished; and it grew heavy with monumental implications, almost apart from mentioned things. I breathed, which suggested that my present form was getting energy in the familiar way—by the combustion of food substances. But as I held my breath for a prolonged moment, there was only a brief flutter, as of a heart quickening its beat inside me. I wondered eerily if this was evidence of a casual change-over, as if my android flesh could so quickly convert to some other energy supply, perhaps that of radioactive salts naturally in its substance. Such minerals were fairly common on the

Jovian moons, and far commoner among the asteroids.

I was compelled to breathe again to speak.

"More could be remarked about, Doc," I said. "We know that the Xians were once of human size, and of the same order of life. So somewhere in their long and checkered history, their survivors invented this new vital principle, and changed themselves. There may be various reasons why they chose to be tiny. Hiding, for instance. But as you once said, that's just part of the android advantage, and not the real issue. Here is a step in scientific development probably as much to be expected as television. If micro-robots can be made, so can larger ones! There's your pending problem on Earth, Doc, natural man versus his far tougher, more flexible competitor! Ultimate newness. It can be real! And wonderful! But to many it will be a fearful thing."

Doc's doll-like visage fairly shone. "The warning, eh, Charlie?" he chuckled. "The demigod dream coming to a head in eagerness and cold tension. Shock of the utterly novel versus tradition, even instinct! No ills; practical indestructibility. Immortality, perhaps. The old, human hope! And yet? . . . But should or can progress ever be stopped? . . . Damn, if we can only take this process of conversion home!"

"You two talk of going home, and of lots of big things," Jan complained. "But do we even know where we are? Just where is this room, and those houses and gardens out there, in a great hollow space like a bubble cavity in a glassy clinker? Of course such a cavity, a few inches across, would seem enormous to us."

Dr. Lanvin studied her soberly. "You're sharp, Jan," he said at last. "A bubble cavity, like in an old clinker. Umhm—m—many asteroids have that sort of structure, maybe formed by the sudden relief of a planet's internal pressure, when X was blown up. Steam and air made the bubbles in the molten, glassy lava. But when it cooled and solidified, the air, and the condensed water of the steam, remained sealed inside, unable to escape into space. Explorers have found microscopic green plantlife growing in many of those cavities, for through the glassy lava sunlight can penetrate, as it seems to do here. Thus, a perfect

natural environment for living things in miniature was created. And a perfect retreat. By gosh, Jan, I believe you're right!"

Doc had always had almost a child's love for small objects. But my own enthusiasm was less complete. Call us all super-mites, placed beyond most of the physical ills of men; but Jan and I were still prey to nostalgia and panic and claustrophobia, for these are things of the mind. Hard men have gone mad in space, because they felt cut off from everything familiar. But at least they had their normal forms and size, and a known way back home. They weren't caught in a clinker cavity beyond a barrier of magnitudes that appeared more insurmountable than a hundred light-years of distance.

It was a treachery of our primitive thought patterns, I knew. It was against progress, and the explorative impulse. Yet I knew that it would have to be reckoned with.

V

JAN seemed about to answer Doc a little sadly. But then the grating over a circular doorway at one side of the room opened and Kobolah floated into our presence, and alighted before us. Uncertainly, Doc and I arose. No human yet could have read the expressions of Kobolah's queer, angular face, limpid filament-framed eyes, or palpated mouth orifice. The ages of history, and alien thought structure behind that visage, were lost in enigma. But now his voice-tympanum buzzed; words came out with an effort, but their arrangement and apparent thought mimicked the human almost comically.

"Bubble cavities," he buzzed. "You are fine guessers. We are in a very small asteroid. But it is not in the asteroid belt. The great explosion long ago hurled it into an orbit around Ganymede. It is one of our many retreats. We wanted to conquer Mars. We attacked terribly. But they destroyed X. The few Martians still surviving tried to hunt our even smaller numbers down. But we found a way; we became little to be concealed. Later, we were at peace, safe. But being small was a habit not needing change. We bore offspring, as we could

before. We built things up again, and multiplied, very few dying. We made more refuges in the solar system, then in the systems of the stars. We are strong and hidden. We have a good way. We are peaceful, except when there is danger. But you three have come—differently. All right, we can watch and learn from you, too. Yes, I have listened to all that you have said, but to learn is good, and not unkind. Right? Now I have answered some of your questions."

The buzzing voice ended in the slurred imitation of a laugh, which tautened whatever now served me as nerves. For to laugh is a specially human, Earthborn thing, not to be mocked. But here I was in the awesome dark of complete novelty.

Doc, however, gripped Kobolah's corresponding tactile member. "Does one do this, after all, among your people, Friend?" he asked. "Or express thanks? If so, here it is. As for the rest, about the technology of transformation—"

Doc did not even make it an apparent question. Yet the question was there. Dr. Shane Lanvin had to learn what he could.

Kobolah mocked up a human chuckle. But his monster's gaze was cold. "This is not for my decision," he buzzed. "But it could be as you wish. Yes, I overheard what you want. Some I could show you now. You and your companions—Charlie, Jan. The apparatus you could see."

"Of course!" Doc replied quickly.

I looked at Jan. Her jaw was set grimly, as if to fight the strain in her eyes. I didn't have to ask her what it was. I felt it myself. All the strangeness around us, beating at, grinding at, our minds. Physical laws turned topsy-turvy, till nothing was the same. Could an android go mad—if the mind in it remained human, and reacted even against the unfamiliar substance of the arms and legs that it controlled? Too long already it had been so. We were realizing what we were. There needed to be some relief from the harsh thought.

"Wait!" I insisted. "Our own forms—are they dead?"

"Alive, sleeping, mindless, where they fell in your ship," Kobolah answered. "I believe—safe . . ."

My arm was around Jan. "There!" I said

triumphantly. "That's better already, isn't it? You go with him, Doc. Jan and I need another mood, now. Ko-bo-lah—" I struggled to pronounce the name as he did. "Are we guests or prisoners? Can we go and come as we please?"

Finally he replied after what seemed an emotionless scrutiny: "I am chief of a project to observe you. Proceed as you like until stopped. There are common devices for propulsion there in the corner. The controls are easy. Have fun. Come along, Doc."

Dr. Lanvin took a proffered propulsion rod from our host. "Yeah—" he said a little dazedly. "Have fun. Be seein' yuh."

He still looked puzzled and amused as he followed the monster from the room. The grill of the circular door was left ajar. Down a passage beyond, daylight showed.

The little bell of Jan's laughter rang out, fringing hysteria. I patted her shoulder. "Easy, Honey," I urged.

She began to regain control. "Common expressions from a buzzing demon who might even be a good guy!" she said. "And around here you don't even walk, you glide through the air! Everything's crazy! And all the scientific explanations, while you get more and more homesick for your own self! Damn it, Charlie, I'm a weak fool! But it's still all wonderful, beautiful! It should be enjoyed. That's the way to counteract fear and strain, isn't it, by enjoyment? No more deep theories for now! Let's go out there to the city, see the sights, follow our noses, try to have fun!"

"Right, Jan," I enthused. "Call us visitors in some exotic port. I guess we'll need practice using these jet rods."

IN A MOMENT we were out there in that lush, valley-like cavern, which really was a bubble, a few inches across, in the glassy crust of a fragmentary asteroid. The jet rods flamed and gave thrust in our hands as we maneuvered clumsily in the air, learning, hands joined to keep from being separated.

First we shot up to the immense roof through which sunlight streamed. Then we drove ourselves down over the gardens and towers of the city. Soon a curious crowd floated around us. They plucked at us, and

their voices buzzed; but none of these Xians seemed to know our language.

"Does it really matter, Charlie?" Jan asked, her eyes beginning to shine, now, some of the strain already disappearing. "Here's an old, old civilization, hidden, grown esthetic, maybe even a little decadent, but extending far. You know it, feel it! Here are beings changed to an android life-basis so long ago that it seems natural—hardy flesh healing if injured, children being born as in the old flesh! Even death almost a myth! Gosh, I hope we can get used to all that, Charlie! Peoples multiplying, spreading to the stars."

"Don't paint it too bright, Jan," I laughed. "Come on. Let's explore farther."

I don't remember how many hours we spent on that long excursion, or all that we did. There was more than one bubble cavern; there must have been thousands connected by artificially drilled passages in double arrangement for traffic moving in two directions. In those passages, currents of air carried one along swiftly. It was a perfect transit method for a micro-world.

In some caverns were other cities. But there were more where tiny agricultural machines, with limbs like a beetle, crawled across miniature fields. Here we ate strange, sweet fruit, that surely contained the carbohydrates of familiar food. But no doubt it also contained radioactive salts from the soil in which it grew. As we had been, it would have poisoned us. As we were, it was a double source of vital energy, chemical and subatomic.

Other caverns were murked with the fumes of electric foundries, self-operating, close to the mine-tunnels that bored deep into the natural, nickel-steel core of the asteroid. In still other caverns there were low buildings full of lathes, drills, presses, among those that we could name—all automatic, too. Then there were caverns where stood lines of square containers, enormous to our eyes, and joined by a network of cables. This must be a power source—banks of nuclear batteries.

And in several adjacent bubble cavities we saw where an enormous metal cylinder was being built, each oblong segment being welded into place by mechanisms of the true robot variety. From any one cavern

only a small part of the curving side of the tube could be seen.

"Some kind of jet engine?" I asked almost rhetorically. "For their further expansion toward the stars? Like moving a whole planet to them, eh?"

"Your guess, there, can be mine, Charlie," Jan said.

We felt no physical tiredness in spite of all our activity. "Let's get back to a more idyllic surface bubble, Jan," I suggested, "and go swimming in water if natural law, here, allows it."

"Crazy!" she responded gleefully.

Air, rising in a vertical shaft, bore us aloft for the few feet that, to us, stretched into seeming miles. Against what appeared to be a green hillside, we soon found what we sought, a great, clear ovoid, glinting like a lens in diffused sunshine.

It almost proved true that we could not swim, here; for the relativity of smallness gave water a terrific surface-tension. It was difficult even to get wet! You could lunge at the dewdrop, and it would throw you back like a net of rubber. Even with android strength, we tried several times before we penetrated it. But then things went well.

Jan glided like a little pink nymph, silver bubbles clinging to her face. We did not breathe. The greater relative viscosity of water did not trouble us. Our eyes did not need to close. Inside the dewdrop swam Xians who had followed us. And extending in crystal vistas were the furry green bulks of water algae.

Maybe there was no moment or place, yet, as beautiful as this. We enjoyed ourselves immensely. But grim questions about our future remained in my mind, though here and now the charm of fantastic difference reached a pinnacle.

"Now I'd like to go up and out on the surface of the asteroid, Jan," I said when we had emerged from the water. "The real test. Game?"

"Why not?" she answered.

So we found our way upward to a surface airlock. It's Xian guard did not stop us. The lock's mechanism was automatic. We crept out onto bleakness, with harsh space all around. Icy stars, silence, deep, dry cold. Huge Jupiter, gray-white, and

streaked. The far-off but still dazzling sun. And blotting out a third of the sky by its nearness, Ganymede, marked by its moving surface mists, almost congealed.

"A test for the android—unprotected in the raw void," I said.

No sound came from my mouth; the vacuum made it impossible. Speech was purely a matter of lip reading, here.

But Jan nodded.

All I felt of an energy change-over was a protective tightening of my skin, and that quickened, momentary throbbing inside me. There was no sense of cold or suffocation, no pangs of blood boiling under the release of pressure. Perhaps our outer flesh now served as a sealing shell.

A SENSE of personal power came over me—android power. The thrill contradicted my darker dreads.

Somehow I wondered how much I had had to be redesigned inside. In any tiny body the relative viscosity of liquids imposes a definite strain on the heart. Were my blood vessels now made especially wide to reduce circulatory drag? I had heard that the littlest insects have to be somewhat special in their inner construction for this same reason.

More confidently, my mind reached out to all distance, and all unknowns. The demigod mood was on me.

It was then that a crowd of Xians emerged from the airlock. Horny digits clutched us.

We were drawn back into the interior of the asteroid, where the hoarded warmth of the sun was augmented by the decay of radioactive minerals. The crowd buzzed around Jan and me. Through tunnel and shaft we were guided back to the cavern and house of our first arrival, mistily illuminated, now that night had fallen.

Dr. Lanvin and Kobolah met us. Doc looked excited.

"Well, Charlie and Jan," he said, "I've met the real ruling force of this world, and have made my appeal. Come along for the answer!"

Kobolah led the way down a shaft that must have reached the center of the asteroid, the most protected place. Here there was a cylindrical chamber, the native nickel-

steel of its walls gleaming silvery in the bluish fluorescence. Aerially, and on the floor, the chamber was crowded.

I looked up at a globe mounted on a spindle that traversed the central axis of that great round room. It gave off a faint blue glow. Its surface showed thousands of facets; but it was not rigid like a crystal. In its translucent milky mass were countless dark veins that pulsed.

"Think of George," Doc said softly. "The same thing in purpose, only far more so. Not a ruler, only an adviser whose opinion the populace respects more than its own. This is a great organized lump of androidal brain tissue of the same order as the condensed stuff now in our heads, according to Kobolah. It has the same volume efficiency, though millions of times larger. And it has all of the knowledge of this far scattered civilization at its command."

Jan smiled. "Poor old George," she mused. "I used to feel that his room over the library felt like a temple to Everything. Well, we've seen a few more mysteries, haven't we? And the feeling is here now."

There was a dry rustle in that steel chamber. First the message came in Xian. Then in English:

"Generally, the technologies of the peoples throughout the cosmos will achieve a sounder, more lasting state of the body as soon, or sooner, than it is deserved, and can be handled intelligently. When it is new, often there is fear, confusion and sometimes disaster. On Earth, the native invention of a process of this sort cannot be more than a century off. In each case it should come at about the time of the first journeys to the stars. But the perfected invention, as it exists here, is better than a crude beginning, which will add to danger. Essentially, Earthians are about as ready emotionally as they will be in a short hundred years. The universe seeks to improve its awareness as rapidly as it can. There will be danger; this is a warning. But it is recommended that the conversion method be demonstrated to the Earthians as a gift."

The rustling voice clicked off.

"Thank you," Doc said solemnly, his gaze directed upward at the great globe. "Thank you, too, for pointing out risks."

Then he turned toward Jan and me. "Yes," he said, "Kobolah tells me that it has a consciousness, unlike old George. And I'll take a chance, in spite of a man at a fire, fuddled in a world changing too fast for him. Anyway, what else can we do? Scientists can't stop studying and learning any more than they can stop breathing."

Kobolah's filamented eyelids blinked. "Then come," he said.

We reached the labs where our intensive instruction, which was to last more than an Earth-month, began. There we found our three micro-robot bodies of metal, kept as in a museum. In other rooms were the furnaces, subjecting silica, hydrogen, and other chemicals to great pressure and heat.

We became acquainted with the vats in which readied substances were held in solution. Next, under Kobolah and Nintan, his superior, we studied the shaper grids and power sources, and the intricate regulating devices attached.

Finally, an insect-like animal of natural protoplasm, native to these bubble caverns, was made the subject of a demonstration. He was bigger than we were, and tolerant to the radioactive poisons of his environment. Otherwise, he was of the same vital principle as humans.

Anesthetized, he was immersed in a gelatin-like solution. Power flowed. Slowly, the substance and chemistry of his tissues was altered, cell by cell, without change of form, and never losing the inner motion of living. It was a process remotely akin to electrolysis.

This was the simplest change that could happen. But there were others. A body, or its three-dimensional simulacra made in any size, could be used as a pattern for a protoplastic form, and made to grow in another vat. But necessary alterations could be interjected too.

The nature of consciousness remained obscure to me, even under instruction. But the idea of a special indivisible spark or node of energy seemed to remain an at least tolerable analogy. Doc Lanvin's comprehension here was a lot better than mine.

"About the awareness, the philosophers were almost right, Charlie and Jan," he said one day. "But science can touch it too,

reverently, as it touches a beating heart, which is a pump, easily understandable by physical law. So it is with the awareness, too. Who would want it any different? Who would want the soul to be merely a formless miracle of command, when Divinity must be logic and order, and completeness of understanding?"

VI

SOMEWHERE along the way, this and other matters became too profound for me. I absorbed what I could; but my field is action and feeling, not deep penetration, like Dr. Lanvin's. He pursued androidal conversion down to its last secret. Drawings and formulae, changed to Earthly terms, went down on parchment, and into his head. He toyed with the wondrous slimes of another kind of life, and at last understood them.

Jan and I were lesser beings. Buffaloed and a little dazed, we would wander off from the labs. Often we swam and laughed. Part of our personalities was adjusting to the fantastic region of The Small. But we worried, too. About our original bodies, and about a reticence before questioning, on the part of even Kobolah. Then Jan expressed another thing:

"Have I learned to read suspicion in the manner of the local folks, Charlie? Their minds are beyond us. But to them, recently, we have been strange giants beyond easy imagining. Now, do they especially resent having their greatest secret given to us? Do they object to the advice of their version of George, that we should have it? I feel a danger, Charlie. They could destroy us, or keep us here. Already they won't let us go up to the surface of the asteroid, though gosh knows what we could do there."

Jan and I were crouching in a little glade, in a lush cavern where the sun shone. No one else was near. I said softly:

"From the surface, I think we might get back to Ganymede and the *Intruder*, and maybe to ourselves, if it's not too late."

Jan looked at me with a wondering frown. "Yes, she mused. A few inches is a mile to us. Some ways, our movements are terribly limited. But in other respects, we're more free. With only a jet rod, we

might travel those thousands of miles."

"It's an idea to keep in reserve," I said. "But there's another trouble. We've been here for about two months—counting one for the changing of our forms. Would our own bodies, even if they are still alive, or our ship and Bowhart and Scharber, still be where they were, after so long?"

A trapped, icy feeling came over me.

Jan was a real pal. You didn't have to hide your fears from her. She was a courageous realist. Her little rounded face only looked sort of stern.

"What to do, Charlie?" she answered. "Wait and see, I guess. Funny how important old familiar circumstances are. But we'll get along—even always being what we are, now. Darn Doc, though, never thinking about anything but his studying. Double-darn our Xian sponsor, Kobolah! Hint about our personal futures, lately, and he gets as elusive as all the history of his kind!"

I chuckled bitterly, and then quoted some of the things Kobolah had buzzed at us: "Leaving soon? How soon is soon? To a long life, a century is nothing. Are you not happy? . . . Yeah, that's Kobolah! A demoniac cross between something we'll never quite understand, and a kid denying with naive aplomb that he stole the cookies."

Yes, an elusive inertia of suspicion was all around us now, like a barrier.

Jan and I got through to Doc Lanvin at last, penetrating his studious fog. An overtone of grimness came into his mild expression.

"I've noticed the change in Xian attitude, too," he admitted. "It's a shame to be wanting to skip out on them, now that I've learned all that is necessary. But with the biggest piece of potential human history in my possession, I could hardly let minor qualms deter me much, could I? We'll find a road to freedom."

Yet it turned out less easy than Doc hoped. Time after time we approached various surface airlocks. Redoubled Xian guard-groups pushed us back gently. Neither stealth nor violence had any chance of being effective. We were constantly watched and outnumbered. Twice we tried hiding in metal boxes, full of parts destined for the surface-assemblies of the tiny world's

slowly developing star motors. Both times we were promptly discovered, and pulled forth with emphasis. Xian voices buzzed. Their eyes were cold. After that second try, Doc had a wild look, like somebody with a treasure that he can't use.

"No star trips for us, yet," he growled. "Not with another bigger purpose back home. Somehow I'll get there, or stop living!"

A LITTLE later we were back in the familiar laboratories. It was night, deepened by the fact that the sun was now eclipsed by Ganymede. But in the windowless lab with its electron lamps, this couldn't matter. Kobolah puttered in a corner. No one else was with us.

Keyed up and angry inside, I noticed a rather unobtrusive combination of circumstances—three new jet rods in a corner; small nets of fine wire, containing steel cylinders of supplies. Casually stuck to a metal prong on the wall was a parchment map, showing a vertical shaft leading to an airlock—the lab's private exit. Beside the map, a little used grille was slightly ajar.

Excitement became a kind of panic inside me. I looked at Jan. Her long lashes blinked knowingly. Doc nodded and walked casually away. The parchments of the secret he had gained were nearby. As if only to add further notes, he took the vast sheaf out of its compartment and carefully divided it into three. Midway in this operation, Kobolah turned toward us. Millions of years of difference in background, and in physical, mental, and emotional form, looked at us from great, cold eyes. A nervous chill came over me, both from the bleakness of discovery and frustration, again, and from the namelessness of that gaze.

Finally the monster imitated a harsh laugh. "Call this outburst peculiar," he buzzed. "Coming from nothing. But I happened to think that it is easy to be a fool, and often one will never know which way is foolish. Remember that."

He turned his attention back to the sputtering electrical apparatus over which he had been working.

"Thank you, Kobolah," Jan said nervously. He did not reply.

We divided the parchment among us, gathered up the equipment, and slipped quietly past the exit grille. An air current lifted us up the shaft to an unguarded airlock, whose control devices were readily responsive.

"Somebody stacked the deck for us," Doc whispered. "The scientist's logic, against popular doubts, maybe? Better to let us escape, than to release us openly, eh? I hope he doesn't get into trouble with his people. Or is there a deeper trick? Well, we'll soon know."

We emerged onto the deserted surface. We were micro-androids in space; dust-grain things matched against the universe, and the future of man. But we were part of both.

In the shadow of the asteroid world's eclipse by Ganymede, there was still soft light from Jupiter. Now we joined ourselves like mountain climbers, with a thoughtfully provided floss cable. Then, with small bursts from our jet tubes, we leapt.

Soon we were falling toward Ganymede, accelerated by its attraction. It was a trip of many hours. Our jet rods checked our speed while we were still in space, and the satellite's atmosphere became a supporting cushion. We had an advantage over full-sized people—we could not fall to destruction. Instead we had to search for downdrafts to help force our descent with the rods.

Completing our journey, however, was not especially difficult. In Ganymede's glowing crescent we located a foamy dot—the airdomes of Port Hoverton. From this reference point it was easy to determine where we had left the *Intruder*. We got down into a prevailing wind. Thereafter our progress was swift.

After a few more hours, and some jockeying with our jet rods, we knew we were over the right place. We could speak audibly again, now.

Doc's grin was a bit forced. "You can even see its circular imprint in the dust," he said. "But the *Intruder* is gone."

Jan pointed below. "There's a space tent, Charlie!" she exclaimed. "The little brown dot! See? And somebody's standing before it!"

Swiftly we jetted down toward that bulging, inflated tent, fitted with its zippered airlock compartment. It stood alone in frigid desolation. "*S.S. Intruder*" was lettered on its side.

We alighted on the plastic face window of the armored figure, and clung to scratches in the material:

From this position we looked at the face of the man, huge, handsome to our former view, but made ugly by magnification. The skin-pores were craters. Individual scales of the epidermis, with the living cells beneath, were all visible, on forehead and nose, and around the colossal eyes, in which the separate flecks of pigmentation could be seen. It was an impressive, belittling vista.

The colossal jaw worked slightly: the narrowed gaze looked grim.

"It's Scharber!" Jan said. "He stayed here to keep watch, hoping for a sign from us, I'll bet! He knew part of what we were doing. But now he doesn't even notice us, any more than you notice moles on a winduppane. And how can we talk to him? He could never hear our voices directly. How can we get anything across?"

The riddle faced us tautly, as if we were trapped forever in a lesser dimension, even beyond communication with our own kind.

"The jet rods again!" Doc shouted. "He'll see the spark of blue fire!"

DOC braced himself in a scratch ridge in the plastic and squeezed the trigger of his rod. At a little distance, the glassy surface boiled up in dazzling flame. When the thread of intense atomic heat was broken off, a smoldering pit was left in the outer surface of Scharber's face window. A mere pinprick.

But plainly Scharber had observed, and added it up. His great eyes widened; the plateaux that were his cheeks, paled. In the canyon-like ridges of his brow, came the sweat of fear. Drops of it were bulging lakes, rushing down past the lopped-off redwood trunks of the blond bristle along his jowls.

It was then that I found that another's fear of the unknown can inspire fear—which was easy to feel, anyway, when looking up at that mighty visage. Here was

I, minute before this Atlas. I felt outclassed beyond measure.

There came suddenly a great shock of sound. Almost, it was more a heavy vibration, like an earthquake. Quivering with it, Jan, Doc and I clung to the roughness of Scharber's face window. Yet it had the beat of recognizable words. Scharber was speaking:

"So you've come, damn you, whoever you are! Like you came for some part of Lanvin and Charlie Harver and his wife. Well, their bodies, still in deep coma, were shipped back to Earth a week ago on the *Jovian*! We have scientists to figure out what you've done to my pals. Bowhart has gone to help the scientists with what we know! So look out! We're strong on Earth. We can fight and punish. So—to hell with you!"

Scharber was terrified before the unknown, but defiant and brave. The oldest human virtue was there, and it gave me a lift.

"I wish we could thank him for that kind of talk," Jan said.

"Maybe we can," Doc answered. "But our big problem is to get home fast, now. Ships from Ganymede to Earth run only every two months, and if the *Jovian* left only a week ago, there aren't any ships here! And how long before coma becomes death? When it has already gone on for so long? I know how you two must feel. With me, maybe it's not quite so bad. But darn, I still need that carcass of mine!"

I looked again at Scharber's frightened face. I had hoped that he could help us. But without space craft, that was unlikely. Oh, a call might be sent for a rescue vessel. But it would be sixty or so Earth-days in arriving, even if involved explanations of our peculiar position could be made by interworld radio.

"There's a way to communicate with Scharber," I said. "We could probably get him to have a message sent to Bowhart to recall the *Intruder*. But to turn a fully accelerated space ship around in mid-trajectory is no simple trick. Anyhow, there'd still be a bad delay."

"So, beyond trying to locate some small craft at Port Hoverton, there's just one other thing for us to do," Doc said grimly.

Jan expressed it for us: "Use the same method that we used to come here from the sub-moon of the Kobolah's people? Go without a ship at all? Achieve a high velocity; trust ourselves to something over four hundred million miles of empty void unprotected? Is that what you mean, Dt. Lanvin?"

Her small face looked pinched and awed.

"That's exactly what I mean," Doc replied. "As things are, I believe that it is considerably the best way. Oh, we can still die, I imagine, under certain circumstances! But the stakes are pretty big. I'd suggest that you stay behind, Jan, until we could send for you. But the form that was you is also one of those in a coma; and time is undoubtedly precious. Yes, there's desperation of at least a minor kind in what I suggest. But I think we've got all that we will need. And being as tiny as dust gives us certain definite advantages."

Jan looked at me soberly. "Sometimes small, inert objects actually leave worlds on their own, don't they, Charlie?" she mused. "Not only atmospheric molecules achieving escape velocity, but sometimes much more massive particles? At least, there was the Arrhenius theory of the propagation of life throughout space—by means of spores torn from the upper air of one world by the light-pressure of its mother star, and propelled by the same force across the interstellar regions to the planets of other suns. About ourselves—well—aren't we about the right size and toughness to travel in approximately the same way?"

I looked at Jan, gulped hard, breathed "Okay," raggedly. Then I returned my attention to the enormity that was Scharber's face.

He had hardly moved; his eyes continued to search the curve of his face window, as if needing another sign from out of the unknown—as if, in fascination, he feared to miss such a sign. But his sweat of terror, at least, was subsiding.

"He can help us, a little," I said. "But staying here, he's unhappy; and can't do any good."

Doc nodded.

"So we do the right thing," I chuckled. "First we change position; mount to the top of the metal flange that frames his face

window. Just let go of this plastic surface, you two."

My jet rod flashed. The cable of floss which joined us all, drew Jan and Doc after me, as I shot outward through the air to the crest of the flange. There we clung. I had to hold on tight to resist the kick of the rod, which would have hurled us far out into the air again, as I used it for a pencil to etch a message on Scharber's face window with its long needle of atomic heat.

It was like writing on the sky. My arm swung wide. But the range of about half an inch, with the rod's energy roaring at full, was about right to give me a normal sized script. The jet's kick was trying to break my arm, otherwise it wasn't too hard to do.

I even tried writing backwards so that Scharber could read my message normally from inside his helmet. Where the needle of heat touched, plastic seethed, and a visible line was left.

I wrote:

It's us, Scharber. Lanvin, the Harvers. Changed. Micro-androids now—like race of Xian origin. Friendly. Go home, Scharber. But please send radiogram. Urge imperative need to keep our bodies alive. Will return to them. A million thanks for everything.

The eyes of the Atlas who was our friend, stared again. Lakes of nervous reaction came into them. The plains of the cheeks whitened, as with some strange frost.

The earthquake spoke:

"Charlie? Or am I going space nuts? Maybe this could be. . . . But who ever heard of it! . . ."

Panic at his own thoughts made Scharber move suddenly. The movement threw Jan and Doc and me from the frame of his face window. As we tumbled in the thin, methane atmosphere of Ganymede, I heard Doc laugh.

"Scharber will probably be all right," he said. "It's the shock of difference, again. But the message won't vanish from the plastic. He won't think that madness made him dream it. He's tough and young. He'll straighten out. . . . Come on, let's get started—for Earth!"

VII

WE WERE lifted upward toward the limits of the atmosphere by the jets of our rods, aided by natural updrafts, which we sought out. Joined together as a group by the floss cable, we were certainly far heavier than any of Arrhenius' theoretical spores; but we had the advantage of intelligence to seek out forces to help us. We were not inert particles to be buffeted by chance impulses of nature.

We attained the high ionosphere of Ganymede where the sky was almost as black as space, where accelerated residual molecules beat against us, giving us some of their upward motion, and where sound had almost been smothered by the vacuum. There, Doc clutched mine and Jan's hands for sonic contact, and said thinly:

"Last chance for vocal speech. We'd better know how we all feel. In the parchments we carry we have about the greatest possible material gift to man, a dream of his from his beginnings. Practical freedom from death, from physical affliction. Immensely increased range of possibilities. The universe, in almost all of its phases, can truly become his stamping ground, now. It's a treasure that men would kill to have. To me it is an inevitable and wonderful step of progress. But there's a confusion in it, based on a split in human nature. You've seen and felt how it works. The mistrust of old instincts for the completely different and revolutionary. Fear and even horror that invokes a savage compulsion to fight back. There's trouble ahead—between the two halves of man's character—represented by eagerness and revulsion. We know how it is from our own feelings. The android bodies we now have are the substance of the treasure, the gift. We exult at its legendary advantages; yet we have a terror of a strange exile, if we can't get back to our weak, natural flesh! The answer, on Earth, when the Big Change really comes, will be emotional adjustment, acclimation, time. Right?"

I answered Doc quickly: "You're looking for possible treachery in our nerves—opposition. Don't worry, Doc. I know every feeling you've mentioned. But the balance is all on the side of belief that progress is

inevitable and good. I say this as a pretty average guy, Doc. Let Jan speak for herself."

My wife smiled. "Charlie knows I agree," she said. "So let's get the show on the road . . ."

We rose still higher in the atmosphere, to a place where the rising sun's rays were like a thin wind blowing against us. It was the pressure of light, the same thing that makes the vanes of an antique photometer spin. Gently, but with increasing speed, we were urged into space. One thing was wrong. Our Earthward course was to sunward, against that minute thrust of solar light. But there was a way to correct part of this.

Accelerating with the help of the pressure, we swept around Ganymede in an orbit; we waited until our direction reversed itself, as must always happen in circular motion. Then we really built up velocity with long bursts from our rods, and tangented sunward, breaking our last tie with the Jovian moon. We were on our way.

I felt my hide stiffening defensively. Over long periods we were not entirely without need of shelter in the awful spatial dryness, so we kept watch. The void is not completely empty. It contains many scattered hydrogen and helium atoms, and a rarer sprinkling of cosmic dust. We were lucky. Gleaming like a planet reflecting solar light, we saw a lump of rock moving with us toward the sun. We jetted to it and clung, laughing silently in the vacuum.

Doc's lips formed the words: "More speed. Time is short. Use up the cartridges of the rods. We have more."

Any object, broken clear of the gravity of a planet or large moon, is free in space. Acceleration is resisted then only by inertia. A relatively small force can build velocity enormously.

We were traveling at many miles per second when Doc mouthed: "Not too much. Eventually we must apply the brakes."

We fused our way into the meteor with our rods, and hollowed it out. We closed the exit with the slag of our excavations. True, the sun's radiations were a source of energy to our android tissues; but they also hastened drying—our worst enemy here since our body fluid was water.

As time went on, our skins hardened further, forming a kind of shell around the moisture in our vitals. And we had a small supply of water in steel cylinders. In a pinch, we needed little. We had food, too, similarly packed—Xian gelatins containing the radioactive and other minerals necessary to sustain protoplasmic flesh, and give it a sure energy source in space.

While we were burrowing into the meteor Jan did a whimsical thing. With a diamond-chip tool she inscribed over the entrance of our cave:

"Dr. Shane Lanvin and Charles and Janice Harver traveling to Earth in the Miniature—2037 A.D."

"There," she said in silent lip motion, for the reading of which we were gaining practice. "Maybe the inscription on that quartz-grain meteor you used to carry, Doc, was just as casual. Maybe it was carved, just on the spur of the moment, recording a journey of little Xians."

"You happen to be right," Doc answered. "I knew those hieroglyphics by heart. I drew them once for Kobolah. He translated. Four micro-Xians were traveling the short distance from one of their inhabited asteroids to another."

Later, the three of us fell into a kind of sleep. Or was it creeping death? It scared me. Our metabolism slowed. Consciousness left us. And so, time went very quickly. Maybe our tissues actually froze. I know now that this hibernation is a natural android function, conserving physical forces during long periods of inactivity. And it could not stop for good our rugged vitality. We revived when the sun was nearer, and warmed us more. Stiff with dryness, we drank water, and loosened up our muscles.

WE CLEARED the exit of our burrow, and crept out on the surface of the meteor. Rushing on in its elongated eclipse around the sun, it had come close enough to Earth to make the latter a disc of about one-quarter the apparent diameter of the Moon, as seen from Chicago on a clear night.

"Our meteor probably won't get much closer," I mouthed. "So we might as well jump soon. No use wasting the energy of our rods, decelerating a meteor mass, too."

Doc nodded.

"Where will we be most likely to find our old selves?" we read from Jan's lips.

"At the Space Medicine Research Hospital, near Chicago, I'd guess," Doc answered. "They send them nearest our homes. Or—peek over a shoulder at a newspaper, or into somebody's television. I think we are news. Are you both sure you know just what to do if that old protoplasm of ours hasn't got tired of waiting for us?"

"Yes," Jan replied.

"Fine," Doc commented. "So we'll drink some water, eat a little, limber up, and then start for home without the meteor."

Much of our physical forces had returned with the prospect of activity. Like any awakening, it was a natural tuning up of body. But I think that even our android chemistry had suffered in our vast journey. Doc and Jan both looked thinned down. I hugged Jan in appreciation of her unwavering spirits.

"Good kid," I said. "It shouldn't be long, now, with luck."

We all jumped, then, and broke our velocity in one direction with our rod-blasts, bending our course toward Earth, now only hours away, even at steadily declining speed. And so, as unheralded as ghosts, but as significant as a new dawn of history, we came in.

Yes, we still hit the fringes of the atmosphere a bit too fast. The floss bond, holding us joined, burned in the heat of friction. Thereafter, there was no keeping together in tumultuous vastness, that, though it was just the Earth's air, seemed infinite to our tininess. I could cry out for Doc, and more especially for Jan; but there could be no answer. Really, it was the first bad break we had had.

I was high over a coastline. And a circumstance, particularly effective in The Small, helped me to orient myself. I found a bit of quartz-dust floating near me. I clung to it. Yes, I had heard of quartz crystals functioning sometimes as natural radio receivers. But my tiny ears were much better designed than the human to pick up minute sounds.

For more than an hour I listened to overlapping broadcasts. But the most powerful station I heard was in Frisco. So that was

the city beneath me. I heard several newscasts. Parts of them were significant:

"... Dr. Shane Lanvin, micrologist, and the Harver couple, his associates, seem near death now in Chicago. For almost five months a spark of life has been sustained by intravenous feeding and other therapy. Dr. Lanvin's party was sent to investigate certain threatening micro-phenomena in the vicinity of Jupiter. Should any credence be given to a fantastic radiogram sent from Ganymede by another member of the party about a micro-race of supermen? Perhaps not; but it has been the thing that sparked the special effort to sustain life in these three during the past six weeks."

I WAS already jetting, riding the prevailing winds high in the stratosphere, and at last grabbing a lift on the skin of a passenger rocket-plane. From high up Chicago looked almost as it did from normal human eyes. There was no feeling of being lost in enormity, at least. That was how I found the Experimental Hospital, and descended toward it. The rest was easy. I had only to follow the newscast men to the three rooms.

Hovering in the air, I felt the thunderous vibration of a doctor explaining wearily for perhaps the thousandth time:

"Tissues and organs have no fundamental defect; some repair and replacement has even been made. There should be consciousness, but there is not. The rest is mystery."

I went to Jan's room first. How long had it been since I had seen her real face? It was waxen, now. All the color faded, as in an old painting. Never mind how I felt; it was bad enough. I drifted to Doc's room. His eyes and cheeks were sunken. Hovering high over him, I could not tell that he breathed. Then I saw myself, gigantic and pallid. The embarrassment of seeing this corpse-like thing was lessened by the fact that it resembled my former lusty self only slightly.

"Hurry back, Jan, please," I urged aloud, though no one could hear me. "Hurry back, Doc."

I heard things in that room. Physicians conversing in thunderous undertones: "I'm getting tired of this. Interesting case, but

it has been too long. Can't last much longer. Yes, sometimes it seems an unkindness to try to maintain life in something doomed to die."

Now that there was a chance at last, the help of those doctors might be wavering.

I found an interne writing at a table in the corridor. It occurred to me that, had it been necessary, I would even have dunked my entire body in ink from his pen-nib, and written him a message by dragging myself across the paper of the form he was filling out. But I still had my jet rod, so I clung to his knuckle, and scribbled on the form in a charred line left by a needle of atomic fire:

I have returned. So have the others. Please continue your efforts. Thanks.

Charles Harver.

The interne's hand jerked. I was hurled toward the ceiling. But I heard his bone-jarring roar:

"Hey—Fletch! Dave! Look at this!"

If they didn't understand or believe, still they would be alert and interested. There would be no breakdown of their struggle to keep those bodies living.

I went back to the pallid thing that had been I, and did what was necessary, after I had cached the parchments I carried, and most of my equipment, in a groove in the molding on the wall. I allowed myself to he inhaled. Deep in the lungs, I cut my way into a capillary with a diamond splinter. It was an insignificant wound, really. Then, in a rushing flood, while dim, reddish light penetrated to my eyes, I was borne along. I knew by a violent turbulence that I passed through the heart. Then there was a sense of rising. Absolute gloom meant that I was inside the skull. There I lodged myself in as small and unimportant blood vessel as I could find.

The rest was simple after that. I merely relaxed. It seemed that I went to sleep. But I was in my own brain. Encouraged by a natural affinity, the little energy-node or whatever it was that was my awareness and my ego, went home. It was, shall we say, a wanderer's return.

When I awoke it was mid-morning. The mental pictures of recent events remained

vivid, yet they had assumed almost the character of a dream. Beyond my window were maples and pines. A robin was scolding. It was very pleasant, indeed, until I thought of Jan and Doc.

"Mr. Harver, you're awake!" a nurse exclaimed. "We knew from last night's tests that you were suddenly much better! There had been a message written in an impossible way . . ." Here, the girl looked frightened.

"Never mind!" I growled. "How is my wife? And Dr. Lanvin?"

"Mrs. Harver is still asleep. But even her color is far better, and she smiles to herself. Dr. Lanvin is much improved, too, though he is still very weak, and has not regained consciousness."

I sighed with relief. They'd gotten back just as I had. Yet, with what we'd brought back, this was not an end but a tense and wonderful beginning. The android secret. Improved man, large or small. A revolutionary fact to be thrust on our mortal race, with all its doubts and enthusiasms and prejudices; to be pushed into the age-old familiar sequence of birth, death, happiness, suffering, and decay of our kind! It was monumental in its possibilities for triumph and disaster; and for a weak moment I had a mighty wish not to disturb the peace, and to let all of this sleep forever.

Of course doctors and newscast men talked to me that day:

" . . . The message? 'I have returned . . .' Just what, in plain language, did that mean? . . . What did you find in your explorations in miniature? There is a story from somebody named Scharber on the way to Earth from the Jovian system, now. A yarn about a race that made itself unbelievably small. Yes—to hide itself, I suppose."

"You might like the story when and if you hear all of it," I answered. "Let Dr. Lanvin, my superior, talk, when he is able."

Late that day I was on my feet briefly. I held my wife in my arms, saw her smile, heard her say: "Well, here we are, and what now, Charlie? I even wonder if folks will be disturbed to know that tiny Xians have been visiting Earth for ages, unnoticed. It's kind of creepy."

Doc grinned up at us wanly from his bed. "This carcass of mine seems pretty well spent from the strain of my absence," he laughed. "Oh, I guess the damned thing could be patched up some more. But why bother? When I can have another body, same size, same shape, same organs, including a brain duplicated to the last filament of a brain-cell—no special principle required, as in *The Small*—all built of tough protoplast, and with a few things straightened for a youthful appearance and advantages? Not a robot any more than a man is a robot, but a human of firmer flesh, capable of all that a human is capable of, but much more. Glad to see you two up and around."

Yeah, Doc had always been a progressive. Oh, he'd had his doubts, too; but now, if the Great Change fazed him at all, he didn't show it.

VIII

JAN and I soon left the hospital and set up housekeeping in an apartment of our own. But with all that medical science could do, Doc still had to stay in bed for a month. But he started directing the forces of destiny, almost as soon as he could give orders.

I was in on the deal, of course, as were several doctors from the hospital, and Bowhart, and Scharber when he arrived on Earth from Ganymede.

"Gonna do it, Doc, aren't you?" Scharber said, when he first saw him lying there, pale and wasted. "You lugs scared me plenty once. Now, though, I feel foolish. Big words you need for this! It's the dawn of the demigods!"

My blood thrilled with a mighty promise, too. At night, going to sleep, I'd exert my will. Lodged inside my head was a micro-android. I'd will myself into it again. And so, for a little while, I'd escape from my own mountainous form, to float free in the air and consult the notes and drawings on the parchment that I'd hidden on a molding in my hospital room.

Doc and Jan would do the same. They, too, following the plan we had made in space, had similarly cached their portions of his notes. But now we had assembled

the complete record of the android process in Doc's house.

And so the beginning was made. When Doc was able to get around again, things really got under way. He obtained a government grant. A whole lab and a large staff of workers, was set aside for us. Retorts, pressure-vats, and other apparatus to produce the basic materials, were constructed and installed.

Ours was a major project, coinciding in time with another major project. For the first real star-ship was finally under construction on the Moon. Three more years it would take to be completed.

But our enterprise reached practical fruition in fourteen months. I was among the men present when Dr. Lanvin lowered himself into a tank of special gelatins.

He was nude and emaciated; yet he kept his humor, and a certain dignity. A thin hand made a slight gesture. "To Scharber and me and the others, he said:

"This will be the easiest trick, learned among the micro-Xians. Simple tissue-replacement, cell by cell. Improved protoplast in place of protoplasm. That's all. Well, wish me luck."

The anesthetic that had been injected into his veins worked. He slumped down gently. The gelatins closed in over his face, and the month of slow gestation toward rebirth began. I saw his body at various stages of the process; little changed in appearance except for much increased robustness.

Other duties intervened, so I did not observe his actual removal from the tank nor his reawakening. But Jan and I met him a few hours later, as he left the small hospital of our lab. The old gray suit he wore, hardly fitted him. He still had his ragged blond mustache. You could tell that he was he—with many years subtracted. He looked about as old as I was—twenty-three. But these were the only signs.

He grinned like a kid, jubilant, but a bit self-conscious. He said, half joshing:

"Look me over—the miracle of the era, the successor to natural man; and no casual observer could ever tell that I'm not as humans have always been. I eat, I breathe oxygen; I need some foods with a different mineral content, it is true. I sleep if I want

to. Given a mate of like substance, I can reproduce my own kind. But I won't age. Cut a finger off me, and it would manage to live independently for a long time. Wound me terribly, and I'd probably manage to heal up somehow. Deprive me of air, or common chemical foods, and my body would try to seek out other sources of energy—sunlight, radioactivity, or whatever is available. Even change my basic tissue fluid from water to—"

It sounded a little like bragging, so Jan cut in with a feminine tease: "Yes, Dr. Lanvin. But put on your overcoat. People will think it odd that you're carrying it on such a sharp winter afternoon."

Doc shrugged back, and obliged her almost with embarrassment, and we were three old friends together.

"People get injured," I said, "or just grow old; and though limited rejuvenation and repair is possible, this is a far better way. That's how it should go, Doc; and you'd think that no one with sense would want to stop it. In months there'll be thousands of androids. But here we are again—unsure of how it'll all be taken. Like you say, this is succession to natural man. It can be conceived of as the old Threat of the Robot idea, with refinements. A force of staggering newness, wonderful to the point of being terrifying. We're almost certain that there'll be trouble."

The story of all we'd learned among the micro-Xians, and its repercussions here at home, was mostly regarded as a fantastic rumor at first. It was talked of lightly on the newscast, and wherever people gathered:

"Little People that have been around all the time, watching us? Shucks, even my Irish grandmother knew that! So we're gonna become wonderful, artificial critters! Homo ex Machina! Well, well! . . . Okay—take me—I was always one for improvements!"

Yes, it went something like that. And when people first truly knew, their reactions were mild, curious, and friendly. One incident I remember particularly.

JAN and I and Doc and a very pretty girl were walking in a quiet street near the University. The girl was someone I had

known from a picture. She *looked* like the picture, again, now. That is, she had become like Doc. For the sake of youth and beauty, women can be more bold than men. She was Irma Tandray Lanvin, Doc's former wife—returned. And maybe she'd learned something about her man—that her rival, science, was part of him, and that she'd better take him as he was. Maybe he'd also learned the need of being attentive to a woman. Anyway, they both looked devoted, now, and I hoped it was so.

But what I meant to tell about was our neighbors. First we met Corbison, the mechanic, saying:

"Hi, Professor Lanvin. A fella'd hardly know you."

"It's still me," Doc answered.

Others gathered around as we paused to talk.

"How do you feel, Doctor?" asked an elderly woman. And when he replied, "Fine!" she said, "Think of it! I'm glad!"

There was even a pooch, who began with a prolonged sniffing at Doc, which progressed to a puzzled yelp, a wrinkling of brow above soulful and humorous brown eyes, then a licking of his hand, and a caper. In my mind the thought sprouted that a dog could become android, too.

"Wouldn't the word be 'canoid'?" Jan teased, knowing me well enough to be sometimes almost clairvoyant.

"Ah, the language struggles to keep up with progress!" a bookish youth commented lightly.

One of two small boys with their father fumbled with my fingers. "Aw, it feels just like anybody's hand, Mister," he growled, disappointed.

"That's a case of mistaken identity, young fella," I pointed out. "I *am* anybody—yet."

Irma Tandray Lanvin took his grubby mitt, and laughed. "Is that the same, Joey?" she questioned. "It shouldn't be, but I'll bet it is."

The kid looked as if his leg was being pulled.

There was just friendly interest and wonder among all those people, then.

"What they reminded me of," Irma said later, "was some kind of simple natives on a lost island, being shown a mirror for the first time—before they think of black

magic. Is that what we all are, basically, at first? Simple? Trusting?"

"That's a good question," Jan commented.

And so it was for months more. But all the elements of catastrophe were present. Earth was a crowded but beautiful place. Technology had done much to give it an idyllic mood, and to shelter its inhabitants in cotton-wool. But that same technology that could build so miraculously, still held a devilish potential, if it served minds motivated by hate and fear. Need one even remember, here, the asteroids that were the fragments of Planet X, or the glassy, fused-down ruins of Mars, still slightly tainted with radiations of nuclear fusion and fission?

The drives of intellect, of whatever origin, seem always to have a sullen, combative streak, constructive in one sense, since it is the force that brings peoples up from nothing. But the stubborn taking of sides also harbors deadly danger.

Almost unobtrusively at first, the threatening clouds began to gather throughout the world. At our busy and expanding lab, Bowhart, who, with Scharber, had been crewman aboard the *Intruder*, came to represent one phase of the opposition to the Great Change.

I remember what he said to me one day, his earnest face serious, his brow crinkled with the effort to be reasonable:

"Charlie, I could be all wrong. But for some time I've been thinking. Already there are twenty thousand once near-dead people who have been changed over; not to mention five thousand others who were in good health. Part of me admires the humanitarian angles here. But then there's that feeling of a slow, creeping invasion, so far unopposed. I can't exactly put my finger on just what makes it horrible; but at night I wake up sweating cold all over. Maybe I've got a blind spot in my head. All I know is that most everything about this remarkable duplication of humanity goes against the instincts in my slow Neanderthal guts. No, don't argue, Charlie. I've heard all of Dr. Lanvin's counter-points, and I just can't feel right about the whole thing. So I'd be a hypocrite if I worked in this lab any longer. I'll leave today, with

the best of wishes to you and yours, and Dr. Lanvin. Tell him, will you?"

"All hail, Bow," I said, shaking his hand. "Thanks for the honesty. I know what you mean. I've felt it all myself, even though I don't quite agree."

Scharber, his former buddy, was also present in my office. They shook hands almost formally, now. For Scharber had moved all the way to the other side of the fence. He'd become the thrilled, eager kind.

"Poor Bow," he growled after Bowhart was gone. "A good guy, a gentleman. But mixed up, like some tough kid, afraid to ride on a merry-go-round. Feeling a black-rat-brown-rat difference. A primitive terror of being crowded out by something far more vigorous, and different from what he has always conceived of as human. Which brings up the reason why I'm here to see you, Charlie. I've screwed up my nerve to change the quality of my bones and meat. As far as I'm concerned, the process might as well start tonight. Okay?"

I nodded. "Okay. Fine, Scharber," I said. If folks had all been like Scharber, there would have been no obstruction of progress. If they had all been like Bowhart, there would at least have been no danger. But as always, there were other types. Among them were those who like to speak out against something.

AMONG these, now, was an old classmate of mine, whom I have mentioned before, one Armand Cope. Already he was becoming minorly famous, laying down the "facts" with a definite oratorical talent. I think that he was, in the main, honest in his beliefs. But pledged and prejudiced to one point of view, he was blindly violent toward its opposite number. Cope was a fanatic. And now, with the smokes of fear curling in many minds, nothing could have been more dangerous than his activities, and the activities of the numerous individuals who were like him.

I heard him speak over the radio and television. Always his words drummed on the same points:

"Friends, the craze for gadgets has become a folly, an insult to man's dignity. The proof has become brutally plain today. All we ever wanted was to live an uncon-

plex life—having houses that we build, and crops that we raise, with simple materials and simple work of our muscles, as nature intended. Science? Much of it should have stopped before it ever started. It was a trap from the first, offering its benefits as bait, not letting us know that it led to this mechanical abomination, which seeks to sully our own natural being with a hideous slime of the laboratory! The prospect makes one's nerves crawl; death is better than the triumph of such a thing! We must fight and fall, if necessary! Let the maniacs and fools know the real strength of humanity!"

Plenty of people were eager to listen to Cope, and to cheer him on.

I gulped, and then grinned at Doc rather wily. Jan and I were in his house that particular evening.

"It's like we thought it would be, before anyone on Earth even knew about what we were bringing them," Jan said.

"You're going to talk back, Shane," Irma, Doc's wife, commented, with a thread of steel in her voice.

"Of course I'm going to talk back," he answered. "But I'm afraid that that could never do enough good. There'll always be enough point to what Cope and his kind say, for scared, furious souls to cling to. I wish mightily that it could be different; but I suspect that what I say will only help to consolidate another fierce belief, to oppose Cope's believers. Yes, like two mighty armies being drawn up for battle. That is the real danger! Well, anyway I've got to try."

And so Dr. Lanvin was on television the following evening, speaking from the Civic Center of Chicago. Jan and I left to run the lab, listened from my office. It was a good speech:

"... I've never liked cheap, showy gadgets, performing some small function that a person might do as well, and as easily, and with less affectation, with his own head and hands. There, perhaps Mr. Cope and I agree, as, no doubt we do about a pastoral simplicity when it is possible—the smells of rain and woods and gardens. But Cope forgets that, crowded as the Earth is, with its billions of mouths to feed, such beautiful, rustic inefficiency is no longer possible, and hence beyond being argued for, reason-

ably, unless the starship brings us to other habitable worlds.

"Which presents the subject of inventions—natural products of natural minds which are too sublime to be called gadgets. The starship, for one. The android process, for another. Does Mr. Cope suppose that the benefits the latter represents, would ever encourage mankind as a whole to suppress it? It couldn't be suppressed, by law or by anyone, as long as there are people left to dream of vigor going on and on.

"Mr. Cope says further that his nerves crawl. This is nothing more than the mistrust of the new and unknown, which time will take away. Yet, worst of all, he speaks of fighting and falling. I hope that he does not mean it. For today, that can truly be a thing of horror, and final silence. Therefore, I plead that he, and all those who have been tempted to think in this manner, review their reasoning, and correct its defects."

I visited Cope at his home. "Look, Cope," I said, "we used to be friendly enough to live and let each other live. Don't you see that what you're doing now can end all that has been built, and finish the human race—natural and android—entirely? You're bucking a logic and a need for betterment that's far too big for anyone—the death of death, you might say. What do you want in its place? The death of everyone? You've got to stop talking as you do, Cope, pounding on the detonator of a world!"

His intellectual face went white with rage at what I had said. "You—Harver!" he growled softly. "You dare to talk to me like that! When you helped to turn this hellish development loose on Earth! Make every human being a snake, and it would not be half as bad. Yes, I was half your friend. But now get out of my house—out before I kill you!"

FURTHER signs of danger were soon more definite, after that. Several days after Scharber's emergence from the process, I was walking with him in a Chicago street. A tactless acquaintance of his, of opposite inclinations and a dislike of him, previously entertained, ran into us in a theatre lobby.

"Hi, Scharber," he greeted. "I heard.

You were born a robot, so why bother to change? And why didn't you at least order yourself a better face?"

Scharber retained a normal capacity for getting sore, and only a normal amount of self control. "A robot is a machine, Powers," he said. "So is the old time protoplasmic man. So is the android. It's silly to make a distinction, based on silly pride at being what you seem to think of as exclusively human. And maybe your face could also benefit by some changes."

Sure, Powers had been brooding, too, and brewing up poison. The fact that he swung at my companion, proved it. Scharber ducked like lightning, and responded with a much-pulled return punch—if he'd given it half of full force, Powers' jaw would have been a mush of bone-splinters. Powers went flat; and it was some seconds before he started to scream and curse:

"Tin monsters!" he spat venomously and inaccurately. "Get them—both of them! Trying to crowd us off the Earth!"

Somebody with sense shouted, "Keep your heads!" But that, to some others, only represented the challenge of opposition. A half-dozen men came at us at once. I upset two of them all right; but being still just ordinary, I wouldn't have had much chance, if it wasn't for Scharber. Presently, with a pack gathering around us, we had to fight our way out of there, Scharber sprinting away at last, with me riding him picka-back. No protoplasmic man could have run a third as fast as he did then. I suspect that that display of speed scared and infuriated our attackers, further.

Other androids came up against this same kind of experiences, and their constant victories in such scuffles, sharpened their terrifying aspect in many minds, and the conviction that there had to be a battle to the death.

Nor was it only humans of the older order who gave way to outbursts of fury. Soon it was give and take. Androids retained all of the old capacities for various emotions. It seemed that each violent incident would be followed by something worse.

I saw one android blown to bits, his flesh still squirming hours after he had ceased to exist as a composite entity. One

severed arm had drawn itself along the ground with clutching fingers, almost like a great slug crawling, for two hundred yards.

There was something demoniac about that, which, for the moment, almost made me agree with Armand Cope.

The fury of the conflict came to a head one night when our laboratory went up in a cloud of nuclear fire. Five hundred persons were wiped out in the blast. It was lucky, indeed, that the lab was outside of Chicago proper, or the casualty list would have been much longer. Of our inner circle of friends, only Scharber was in the blast, and he escaped flying fragments and incandescent heat by dropping behind some heavy masonry. Radiations couldn't hurt him at all, though for a time he must keep away from the rest of us. The others of our group were safe in town.

There was the cold rage in Scharber's face when I first spoke to him from a little distance at the edge of the ruins.

"Damn them all, Charlie!" he growled. "Stupid, thick-headed, backward fools!"

"Easy, Scharb," I said. "The government, and the considerable majority of saner people, are trying to restore order."

It was true. Police forces were everywhere. Our president pleaded for calm. A cache of nuclear munitions was discovered and put under guard. It might even have belonged to androids. Nobody knew. It was in an old Chicago cellar. But of one thing we were sure—that there had to be many other caches of hellstuff, undiscovered and available to the hotheads and jerks, hidden in caves and woods and various other places, throughout the world.

One thing wasn't done, Armand Cope, and other rabble-rousers like him, were not put under restraint. It could have been accomplished within the emergency provisions of democracy, though a willful connection between the speeches that they had made and the blowup of the lab, could not be proven. Maybe the government was afraid to restrain them—afraid that their arrest would make them martyrs—and that this martyrdom would trigger the bombshell in the taut nerves and frightened minds of their followers. This belief may well have been the truth.

IX

JAN and I went to Doc's house, inside a police cordon, for a discussion. We risked radiation by bringing Scharber along. We wanted to make sure that he wouldn't do anything vindictive, which might well have happened had we left him by himself.

Irma met us at the door. "Shane almost wishes now that the android process had remained just the property of the micro-Xians," she said. "That's how bad matters seem to him at this point."

Doc jumped to his feet as we entered his study. "Cope means to speak again tonight," he announced "Cope, and about a hundred others of his crowd, from scattered radio and television stations. We know about what they'll say, more or less. Yeah—Get rid of these mechanical demons while there are still less than thirty-thousand of them. Before it's too late! Kill the serpent! Return to simplicity! Do you know that even their radioactive metabolism is poisonous to us?"

Doc paused and groaned. "The latter isn't even true," he went on. "At least not while an android is on Earth, breathing oxygen and living by chemical energy. Then the radiation of a subatomic tissue-process is suppressed almost to zero. But that's the way most of Cope's arguments go—they leap thinly to conclusions, without thinking matters out to any depth. But many people don't want to think deeply, or else they're too frightened. And tonight I suspect that Cope and his bunch will give the order to attack, Charlie, what are we going to do?"

I was in a cold sweat. "You know what we can try as a temporary relief measure, Doc," I said. "We can silence Cope and a few of the others—you know how. The only trouble is that there are so many of those loudmouths, and only you and I and maybe Jan who are in a position to do the only thing that can be done. We may not be able to shut up anywhere near enough of them to get over this danger spot, but we have to try."

Jan came over to me and pressed my hand, and it helped. She was always courageous and cool.

As it turned out, there were few speeches of Cope's kind made that night. Cope col-

lapsed before the television lenses and the microphones. No, he didn't die; he had what looked very like an epileptic fit. He dropped before he uttered a word. He frothed at the mouth, he snored. He looked ridiculous, even mad.

Why all this happened was simple. It was an old Xian trick. A micro-android—Doc had transmigrated briefly again—was inside Cope's skull, tampering with his brain. The tiniest flash at lowest power from a jet rod directed against the proper nerve center, was how it was done.

Doc silenced another character called Minton. I gagged another pair of flannelmouths named Trefford and Donalds the same way. Jan managed to fix one called Parkhurst. That made five of the worst who had been operating around Chicago. But it still left over ninety others. It worried us badly, until we got back home, and into normal sized bodies, once more. Scharber had been a good boy, staying out of trouble beside Doc's television, with Irma.

"Not one of the others said much either," he announced quietly. "They all fell on their faces the same way." He paused for just a second before he added, "I wonder why?" his eyes oddly aglow.

"There could be only one answer to that, couldn't there?" Irma hinted.

Doc grinned reminiscently.

Jan smiled. "The elves of legend, the helpful ones," she chuckled. "Well, who knows but what there's a connection with those old folk tales? Legends frequently have a basis in fact. It seems that I remember a strange, deep little guy who lives way out in space, and down near the limit of smallness. His name was Kobolah, and lots of his people didn't believe that Earthians should be trusted. He almost got into trouble over that. But it appears that he still has lots of friends among his own kind who'd like to see the android become successful among us. It seems, further, that if Kobolah's particular asteroid world took off for the stars, already, as appeared to be intended, he and some pals have so far stayed behind. Or else it was just some pals of his who helped us. But who knows? Maybe we'll see him again. Anyway, his world was as wonderful a place as you could imagine. I wonder if there's any-

thing more strange in the whole universe?"

As Jan's musing words ended, I saw a strange, speculative look in Scharber's face. Doc's eyes were soft for a second.

"I guess that miniature things still intrigue me," he said. "But we're tied up with bigger facts now. I think we've won a temporary peace, but I'll bet that that's all it will be—temporary. Even if Cope and the rest of the same crop stop shouting, now, there'll be others to do just as they did. In a day or two we'll know for sure."

DOC was right. On the very next evening Armand Cope was on the air again, frightened, but determined. "This treachery of last night, even though I do not understand its method, makes me even better aware that this is a fight to the finish," he growled. "A fight against a hideous thing, to which there can be no end except victory or death. As long as I am a man, I shall be proud . . ."

Doc shrugged mildly. "I'd almost say 'Blah, tiresome fool!'" he remarked. "But it wouldn't be fair. Cope stubbornly believes what he says, I'm sure. It's etched into his nature. To a lesser degree with most, it's the same with many others. So, this is it."

The following evening, Doc made his suggestions over the air, speaking from his house:

"I am addressing those, who, in the eyes of some, have ceased to be human. But perhaps the term, 'android' should be dropped entirely. We are men in form, mind, emotion, aim, and pleasure—let there be no instinctive, sullen, backward doubt of that! Our shape and our organs are human. We have sprung from man's aspirations, and his quest for more knowledge and better living. Though the knowhow of our living was borrowed from another people, it would have come to men on Earth in time, and by their own efforts. We are thus, simply, a far harder variety of what humans have always been. To those who are weaker, troubled by fear, less understanding, we should be generous, until more time lets them realize these truths. Therefore, I suggest that we leave the Earth

to them, going outward where our powers permit us to go freely."

That is how it has been. Among the androids, as if the interstellar regions was their natural habitat, Dr. Lanvin's hint took hold at once. On Earth, tension eased gradually, until even Armand Cope's voice sounded puzzled, and then sank to silence.

But let me tell about a side-event. Doc found a toy-sized craft in his workshop, a ship with tapered bow and stern, and retractable airfoils. It was less than an inch long. Need I say how we boarded it—Doc, Jan, and I? Or how later, we and one Kobolah, conversed under the scope of a micro-manipulator, while Scharber and Doc's Irma took turns watching us through the lenses?

We thanked the tiny Xian for all his help. We saw his electronic visual filaments blink over his eyes when Jan suggested:

"Kobolah, you could be cast in a larger form like the old Xians. You could go with Dr. Lanvin in the first ship to leave for the solar system of Sirius."

"Maybe—someday," he buzzed in answer. "Not now. To Sirius? I'm going there, anyway with my own people soon. Time? There is plenty—for everything. May you make few errors."

Then, with his jet rod he blasted off into the air. Within a minute, his ship, aboard which were hundreds of his kind that we had seen, spat blue fire, and darted out of the open window.

Scharber chuckled almost wistfully. "Micro-androids," he said. "Strangest thing I ever saw. Why didn't he take me with him? Got to start seeing the outer-universe somewhere. Why not in miniature? Darn, androids can go anywhere."

X

THE next day, Scharber's protoplasmic form was found inert in his small bachelor's apartment. When we were notified, Doc and I had a look at the place. On Scharber's study table were many brief messages, written on paper with a heat-charred line. The words were English, and spelled correctly; but the script was strange. I knew the instrument of the writing. I had written with it myself.

But Scharber had left a note of his own, written to us in ink:

Dear Dr. Lanvin, Mrs. Lanvin, Charlie, Jan. Everybody—So I win. . . . The Little Guy must have guessed. Anyway, he brought his ship here. Then he wrote his questions—though he could hear me answer. Do I want to come along? Yeah—look at the other papers—see for yourselves. You must have made a good impression out there—you who were there. So he likes Earthlings. For pets, maybe? Who knows? Well—I didn't say no. . . . Wish me luck, and the same to you. Do me a favor? Whoever goes first out to Sirius, take this big carcass of mine along—being android, it ought to keep for a long time. Maybe I'll need it after a while. Right now I'm getting a smaller edition. So long for maybe a hundred years, more or less.

Scharber.

Smiling like an elf, Doc looked at me. "How do you feel?" he asked.

"Same as you, I suppose," I answered. "Haunted . . ."

During the year that followed, that first starship was completed, and ten others of the huge mile-long craft were begun. Jan and I saw them all in their cradles when we went out to the Moon to visit my mother and dad.

It was really meant to be a farewell trip. Jan and I hadn't expected to get berthed on that first starcraft, the *Euclid*, but it happened. Not all of the voyagers were of the new flesh.

"Farewell nothing," Dad told me slyly at the house. He looked more like a slightly older brother of mine, than somebody paternal.

"We're going along, Charlie," Mom intimated. "We've always been ready for new adventure, haven't we?"

In due course the *Euclid* came to the New Mexico Spaceport to pick up its passengers, Jan and I and the folks had been on Earth for over a month by then. We and Doc and Irma arrived at the port on the same rocket plane, and as I looked up at the brooding hull of that colossus I felt a little as if a kid dream of mine had come true—that I was matching my lusty strength against the whole universe, and winning. To fight and to win against something, has been a need in human blood and bone for uncounted eons. But should I feel a bit puny and sheepish, too? Comparing myself to Doc, for instance?

This was his special day. Back there behind us, as we approached the starship—back there beyond the guardropes—were the crowds of curious, thrilled, scared, envious humanity. Some cheered for what the *Euclid* meant to progress—or perhaps they cheered more for a greater triumph—the thirty-thousand demigods who would be among its passengers. But was some of the cheering given in relief at being rid of them?

Bowhart was there, to shake hands with Doc and me and Irma and Jan, and to meet my folks.

"Good luck to you all," he said. "No Great Change, yet, for you, Charlie? So I hear. Funny, huh? Dr. Lanvin—I want to give you special best wishes. You look happy, so I guess if you're satisfied, nothing I can say will be an offense. But I still wouldn't want to be you for a million dollars."

Bowhart must have known that much, saying what he did; because Doc wasn't at all offended—just airily nettled, like an ageless leprechaun pitied by an urchin.

"Oh?" he asked lightly. "In the past many a millionaire would have given more than a million for another week of life and vigor, and it was no sale. The value is a lot bigger; but it doesn't cost that, now—it doesn't cost anything except a little more growing up. What do you want to do, Bow? Drink beer, eat ice cream, make love? I can do all that, too. Someday you'll get it through your fuddled head that I'm still human. I think you're catching on already. Yes, the androids are leaving Earth; but you know that the process that makes them is still here. Every day there are more labs. Because people get hurt terribly, or wear out beyond reasonable repair. And what would you expect them to want to do then, just die?"

Doc wasn't just talking to slow minded Bowhart, but to all humanity that was like him. It was his final message. But there was another touch to it that wasn't in words. It was a cocky gentle air that maybe suggested the contrast of—say—eating a fine dinner, and then taking a long dive, unclothed, through the vacuum of space—both with equal relish.

Bowhart looked puzzled, and a bit sullen.

Maybe he was beginning to catch on at last.

Well, we made that enormous jump across the light years to the Sirian System. Seventy-nine years it took. I don't think that even an Xian ship could have done much better. There's no overdrive or time-travel in sight 'funny, isn't it—here, for once, nature resists us. But to avoid boredom there was the older idea of suspended animation—natural to the android, and capable of being induced in the older flesh by special anesthetics and chilling. My wife and our friends passed the first two years of the journey awake, to help operate the ship. The other seventy-seven years passed as a moment.

We found us a world just slightly smaller than the Earth, and young and beautiful. There was no native intelligence yet, comparable with the human. The valley in which we live is rich and lush, and it slopes down to the ocean. Like my dad and mother, Jan and I have a sturdy house of stone; cleared fields, and livestock descended from the animals and poultry brought out from Earth.

It's Mom's old rustic dream. It's even Cope's! It's an idyll.

A town is springing up fast nearby. It is one of the first colonial settlements of what may become a great Earthborn interstellar union.

Doc is in the town with Irma, building it, planning, full of goodwill for everyone. Scharber's normal-sized android body still sleeps in a special vault under the town hall. But who knows at what moment he and Kobolah may come?

Doc kids my folks and Jan; but especially he kids me:

"You're silly, Charlie, why don't you switch over to the android level? What are you waiting for? Sure, I like to live in a house, too; but sometimes I sleep out in the rain or the snow just for the hell of it! Of course there's no real good in that kind

of nonsense! But changed over, a man has an average of a twenty per cent increase in intelligence, simply on the basis of better energy and alertness! You may think that you feel good, but even if no trials come to demand superior stamina, you'll feel better; you'll do three times the work, and never tire at all! Why, even on Earth, according to reports that are relayed from starship to starship coming this way in a long string, humans as they were are almost gone. So what are you—a diehard, a stick-in-the-mud? Even—you?"

"Maybe it's the seventy-seven years lost, Doc," I josh back at him. "I've got to catch up, perhaps. Of course I recognize all the advantages. I've been through the mill. Just as with you, in my head, lodged against my upper skull and doing me no harm, the medics say, is a micro-android which my ego has inhabited, and which I almost never use now. I remember what it is like to be super, Doc, I grant that it is all the truth. But there's time. Just let me think some more."

Yeah, Jan and I think of all we've seen, that we never dreamed was there. Beauty, strangeness, vastness, smallness, wonder, knowledge. We've come a long awesome way.

You feel that you know a little more about the universe, and that you're warmly and humbly a little nearer to its ultimate Mystery, and are at peace. You know that the Great Change in man is right, and was intended.

We've been stubborn, and I'm not entirely sure why. I know that we and the others of the old flesh will yield to progress sooner or later. Maybe we've been clinging sentimentally to the past of man. But deep down, I believe I know the real reason. We're slow, we're human; just give us time. It's hard to accept the responsible role of demigod.

We're just scared of so much newness.

THE VIZIGRAPH

(Continued from page 53)

so vital elements even in the upper strata of another world.

For the sake of comparison, imagine our own planet being viewed from Venus. What would the spectroscopy imply? That the atmosphere of Earth was preponderantly nitrogen, or to use the phrasing of my critic, Earth's atmosphere is well night devoid of everything other than nitrogen. Which is true, but how misleading.

To follow up just a little, the spectroscopy can only probe the outside edge of the Venusian atmosphere because of its high reflectivity; but what it tells has led to a theory that supports the concept I previously put forward, that the outer cloud layer is to reflect the huge amount of unwanted Solar Radiation.

This theory suggests that these clouds may be formed of globules of plastic brought about by the combination between Formaldehyde and water vapor. What an ideal shield. And to further my own little idea, where there's water vapor there must be water, and water is also compounded from oxygen!

Another well known fact is that there is more oxygen in the substance of the Earth than in the atmosphere around it; I can see no reason why this shouldn't apply to Venus, and, in development of my previous letter, supposing our Venusian counterparts live underground; is it not conceivable that their oxygen is excreted by the strata that they live in. This in itself would give a lack of oxygen in the upper levels of the atmosphere.

Leaving Venus and transferring my attention to Mars I find that only a difference of opinion exists as to where life might exist. That in itself is encouraging but I would like to venture a few words on the red areas so discouragingly viewed by my critic. Are they really red? We all know the effect of sunlight passing through a cloudless atmosphere; most of the light above the red frequency is absorbed causing the light to appear red.

During a favorable eclipse of the moon this is amplified so that the moon, for a while, reflects only red light. From this might we not conclude that the relatively cloud-free atmosphere of Mars only reflects red light, and may not the terrain viewed through this atmosphere be colored by it. Observers have often given an opinion that the actual coloring of the surface is yellowy, not red.

I do not refute the high probability that much of Mars' surface is desert and unable to support life like us, but I will draw this parallel, much of the Earth is incapable of supporting life like us. The percentage of arable land on Earth and Mars need not differ appreciably, although the disposition obviously does.

Now I'd like to have a rub at this question of retrograde satellites. First I'll split them into two groups. Jupiter 8, 9, 11, and 12; Phoebe and Triton make the first group. All five of Uranus' making the second.

With the first group two facts are outstanding. (1) High orbital eccentricity. (2) Large deviation from the plane of the ecliptic. These salient features incline me to believe that these errant bodies are not natives of the Solar system. They may be captured asteroids, though generally this idea is no longer accepted; or they may be ex-meteors or other space debris which chanced to enter the planet's gravitational field within the range of speeds and distances that would enable that particular planet to hold it in

orbit. Supporting this is the fact that only the major planets have retrograde satellites.

Group two is rather a different matter. Are these satellites really retrograde, or are they only apparently so. Uranus itself has such a terrific polar inclination, eighty-two degrees that it seems likely that, somehow the planet itself has been turned. Eight degrees would make all the difference between these satellites being retrograde or normal. Before we try to advance theories as to their regressive tendencies I think it would be wise to explain Uranus' unique attitude.

I sincerely hope that this letter has been of wide interest; it would please me immensely to see more space in Vizigraph devoted to discussions on and theories about the actual sciences met with in our type of fiction.

Now that I am supplied with your magazine three months before the date on the cover I can assess the quality of present and future issues with those of the past and I am well pleased to find the standard maintained. To me PLANET is the best magazine of escapist literature.

Incidentally, why don't the different S.T.F. publishers get together and advertise their products on a large scale. Many people have the queerest ideas about science fiction in general without ever having read any. I'm sure that sales would profit through such a scheme.

Yours sincerely,

A. KEITH KING

CALL FROM CANADA

Littlejohn Lane,
Cooksville, Ontario,
Canada

Dear Jack,

How about adding a couple of pages to VIZI. It's the best letter column there is, so it deserves the right to be about 112 pages long. Why don't you write a real slam-bang editorial to get things started in LA VIZI and then let the fan take over for a couple of years until something new is needed to argue about.

A fanzine review column would be a nice thing to have, thereby satisfying many fans and still leaving enough to satisfy the ordinary readers.

I've read every issue of PLANET since the March 1952 ish and think that it's one of the best pulp mags in existence today. Either put PLANET on a monthly schedule or start selling S-A books up here in Canada, both would be even more heartily appreciated.

Haven't read any of the stories in the March 1954 ish yet but expect them to be wonderful (as per usual) so keep up the good work.

With reference to the editorial I suggested, if you don't want to write it, I'm sure there would be lots of fans (take me for instance), who would be more than happy if they were allowed to write it for free.

Well that's all the ideas I can wash up this issue so I'll clear the field as soon as I say that anybody who writes me will be answered.

Yours sincerely,

MORGAN HARRIS

Ed's note: All brilliant editorial ideas are most welcome. Just incorporate them in your letters, please.

MARIL AND GRANDMA

Box 1296
Aransas Pass
Texas

Dear Ed,

Sound battle stations, clear the decks for action, and stand clear. Verbal mayhem is in the offing. There

hasn't been a real bloody feud in La Vizi for a long time, a state of affairs that is fast coming to an untimely end. Hazel Irene Stamper, Femme Fink, en garde.

By the way, Ed, "fink" is a word I do not think you will find in Webster's, but a "fink" is a low-down, dirty, nogood who would steal from a blind man, double-cross his best friend (if he or she had one), garrote his grandmother and hang up his children by the thumbs. In addition, he would have a repulsive personality, a nasty disposition and in all probability, halitosis.

As for "fen", I do not think Miss Stamper has to worry about anyone calling her that name, and certainly not "fan".

Carol McKinney brought up an interesting subject and it will be interesting to see what reactions it fosters. Count me vote for the group-marriage, or clan-type thing. Everyone has various interests and different moods, and it takes more than one person to satisfy the varied demands. I'm referring to the intellectual plane here, the physical side of a group marriage might get a little confusing, but if all the individuals concerned were intelligent, mature people there should not be any insurmountable problems. Anyhow, it is an idea.

Would like to comment on more letters but fear I'm dragging this out too long. Give pics to Carol McKinney, Claude Hall and Joe Keogh. Carol because she's the best; Claude because he thinks he is, and Joe because he thinks Bradbury is.

GRANDMA PERKINS AND THE SPACE PIRATES was the best story this ish, and isn't it too bad that wonderful characters like Grandma are fictitious? The remaining stories come wagging their tails behind, in motley array . . . none outstanding.

Yours truly, and breathing fire,
MARIL SHREWSBURY

REAL COMFORT

2264 Chestnut Avenue
Long Beach, Calif.

Dear Editor,

Congrats on a perfect ish of PLANET. Man, what a refreshing surprise . . . a real great cover . . . solid-sending stories, and the Vizigraph—great, glorious, growl . . . it's longer, funnier and sassier.

Seriously, it's a zany ish. I've seen these stf mags rise and fall since the Gernsbach era and I'm mighty glad to see PLANET rise.

Yours drooly,
AL COMFORT

SHORT CUT

3 Arkle Street
Gateshead 8
Co. Durham
England

Dear Ed,

Guess I'll be a little late to review the January ish, but living way over here in England I get my copy of PLANET a month or more after you stateside fen. Still, better late than never.

Ray Bradbury's story, A SOUND OF THUNDER . . . think I've read it before. The whole thing was familiar. Was it a reprint? A good story, tho, somewhat like Bryan Berry's style. Ouch, no offense please. I just couldn't resist it. I enjoyed every other story, so I have nothing to gripe about. I'll find something tho, so do not think you are let off.

Funny coincidence . . . after I wrote my last letter to La Vizi, in which I asked when PLANET was

coming back to England . . . guess what? A couple of weeks later, there on the racks staring me in the face is a copy of PLANET. Sa I buys it, but alas it was cut down to baby size. Missing was La Vizi and a few stories. Why? Why? Why? The fellows over here are sure missing a lot. Those who do not see the original copy, I mean. The British copy is also back-dated to the original.

I hope you do not mind, but I cut up a few covers of back-dated PLANETS. I took a Bern off one, a hunk of man holding a zzap gun off another, a space-ship, a nilly-naked she-male, and a few other odds and ends from others. Stuck them all onto a sheet of card to form a scene, fixed a calendar on the bottom and, lo and behold, a gay stf calendar for my bedroom wall.

One of the stories in the Nov. ish I had read before was HIGHWAY J. I read it in AUTHENTIC SCIENCE FICTION just before I got the Nov. ish of PLANET. Was a good story, and a new approach to time travel.

DON ALLEN

Ed's note: You could do us both a favor, Don, by writing the British publisher of PLANET and asking him these very same questions. I know that I'd be mighty interested to find out just why the British ish is minus La Vizi and a few stories. Let us Vixites in on what you learn, heh?

ANY NEW PLOTS?

Route No. 4
Trenton, Tenn.

Dear Ed,

First let me start off by saying that you have made PLANET a much better magazine. You have brought it back up to the level of Jerry Bixby's editorship. Which, at least to me, is the all-time high. And you've held this higher place for about a year.

You have, I hope, made both Anderson and Vestal second to Freas. He has given PLANET some really good covers. His art has something a little different about it. He's original. Take this issue's lead illo (page 4-5). Could you—can you—imagine that coming out of Vestal? Vestal was okay with "dark priests and BOLD heroes," but he just doesn't have the stuff for your new magazine, PLANET.

Your stories haven't made as big of a change yet. PLANET has stuck too long, and too often to the adventure-type of science fiction. Poul Anderson wrote many of these for you, Poul Anderson is a writer who can tell a delicate tale of a culture in the far future, or about a man with any number of lives. Or he can, as demonstrated in your 2CSAB for winter, he can tell a tale of the future in which he has adventure, love, wit, humor and a plot. I am speaking of SILENT VICTORY.

Why hasn't he done such things before? Policy? Well, I think that it's time that this policy changes. True, I'm not an editor or publisher. I am a fan writer, but that doesn't matter. But I still believe that it is time for PLANET to go forward. Or sit down and prop itself on this new height. And this new height doesn't look able to support PLANET for long. I feel unsure when I read letters that say: (I'm quoting loosely) "I've just finished your latest issue, and I really liked it! Please do not ever change PLANET!"

Now isn't this a little silly? Yes, I like PLANET as it is now. But just think what you could do? No, I'm not saying to get rid of adventure. But you can continue to cut down on it.

Let's take SWORD OF TORMAIN by Eric Storm

for a good example. This is an adventure story that was readable, but the plot was old. Cut out adventure unless it has a new plot. Or variation of one. Cut out all stories that have old plots!

But this, I sadly admit, just wouldn't work, would it? What would you print? But I had rather see a good short piece with a twist to the plot, than an old, worn, hacked to pieces, guessable after the first page, adventure story.

Another thing that bothers me is the earth in the far future being back in the far past. Writers for PLANET have stayed on this subject too long. You could cut this out, except for an Anderson epic every now and then. (Along the lines of THE STAR PLUNDERER. Not like it, but well written like it.)

Which brings me down to the point that I feel that I should sum this up in a few sentences. Try out a new story policy change. I do not ask for better paper, more pages, etc. But better stories with less action. Unless the action is needed. *A straight action—because it is an action story is not wanted by this writer.* Just continue to change little by little, and present a more balanced fare.

In closing this opening bid, I feel that I should say that I'm sorry if my big slippers have mashed any toes. But that's the way I feel about it. And you?

Sincerely,

JAMES LEWIS

WANTED: ONE STOMACH PUMP

318 East Commercial St.
Appleton, Wisconsin

Dear Editor,

The most terrible thing happened yesterday. PS came out again. There can be no doubt that you put out the worst mag in the entire sf cow field. The covers are hideous, both in subject and quality. This miserable attempt to sell star-drenched sex must go! If you must attract the little people who get all hot and furtively bothered at the mere thought of s-e-x, be open about it. Have bems and nudes rather than gals clad just enough for you to remain self-righteous.

The illos in PS make me sick to my stomach. You should get the fellow on the back cover. Or can he only draw rupture-essers? There hasn't been much Vestal lately, for which I am thankful. Jocko, what's with you anyway? Emsh has done good work for other mags. Freas is the best doodler to recently sneak into ASE. Yet they both have awful work in PS. Do you have poor taste and judgment or don't you give a damn? As for the covers: I have to hide them when my art student brother comes. The last time he saw one of your paintings, he went into a state of shock for eighty-one days.

The editor? I donno. Whenever I try to get a mental image of you, it comes out as a rotted human head swarming with maggots. Not that I don't like you, you understand. In fact people should give you things. I would love to give you seventy lashes with eyeballs attached HAH! You thought I was going to say a wet noodle, didn't you. Didn't you? DIDN'T YOU!!!!???

I see that your novel of distant worlds (and a novel that short is really novel) is by Foxy Hog's den. Him I cannot stand. It is going to take a while to get up the courage to read the stories(?) so I'll spit on the letters.

Don Allen is interesting. Give him an illo. It is indeed a rare moment when a fan has something worth saying. And when you learn something from him! Give him two illos.

Carol McKinney and Joe Keogh are two of a kind. Both write longwinded letters. Neither ever says any-

thing. Both always get printed. Why don't you save the space for a GOOD letter. (Not that I'm hunting. I don't give a damn if you print this or not. In fact I doubt that you have the guts to print it.)

Claude Rayer: you I like. I'm going to write a letter to you, but at the rate I do things you'll probably read this before I get around to it. Use your military training. Get in there and Fight! I'm here to reinforce you now. The way you toss insults about, I may let you join my anti-fan club.

And let me say right here that I am not nor ever have been a fan. Along with a certain Canadian who must remain nameless (they haven't got around to naming all the swamp creatures yet) I am convinced that at least ninety per cent of Organized Fandom is made up of happy little fairies anxious to send and receive gay photos. The other ten per cent is too damn dumb to know what it is all about.

Some one should stomp on Stamper. What in the name of the greatest god Kille is the matter with that broad? I am not a fan but even I know that fen is plural. Wassamatter gal? You got two heads? Or are you in a Haze? And what's wrong with "fink?"

Hey, Drooly Beck! Don't be so harsh on Ellik. I happen to know that Ron is only six years old. Since you say mean things about 2 SCIENCE-ADVENTURE BOOKS I will say something nice about TOPS IN SF. Jocko, old boy, this is one of the top sf slicks. The artwork and stories are far superior to PS. Why? I can see why reprints are of better quality, what with so many stories to pick from. But why such superior art work? Freas has a tremendous painting. The illos are superb. Why I ask you?

I resent Christoff's adjective used on comic books. I agree that most of them are crummy, but some are much better than PS. The entire E-C group for instance. The eds of those mags have a sense of humor. They are the Samnynes of the comic books.

Ellik . . . phue! I don't mind when he writes this slop to me. After all, he is paying postage and the waste basket is only sixteen feet one and one-half inches from my desk. But when I plunk down two bits I don't want to have to buy a mop with it. I simply can't stomach this type of letter. Grow up, Ronald. People (?) like you give fandom a bad name.

JOHN COURTOIS

PROTESTS FROM PROVO

377 East 1st North
Provo, Utah

Dear Jack,

Well, really now, what did that ghastly cover have to do with any story inside? Sometimes even PLANET goes too far.

Holden's stories are practically always good, so it was no surprise that his THE MAN THE TECHMEN MADE was the best one this time. Somewhere in the past few months there has been another story based upon almost the same plot,—and it was very good, too. Can't remember where I read it though.

I did not like THE PURPLE PARIAS. Knew as soon as the title caught my eye that it was likely to be one of "those" stories. And say,—what was the idea of leaving McKimmey's story THE MOON AND THE SUN, out of the contents page??? Was it an accident, or didn't you have enough room or something?

There was one thing that puzzled me in McConnell's story, GRANDMA PERKINS AND THE SPACE PIRATES,—(what a title!)—right at the beginning it says that the ship "was blasting through space at close to the speed of light, bound from

Callisto, one of Jupiter's moons, back to Earth." Then on page 16 is the statement that the ship landed at the N.Y. spaceport "many days later." Well? The ship couldn't have been going very close to the speed of light for it to have taken many days to get back to Earth, from that distance! (I'm an incredulous critic; it's fun to spot the flaws in the plot!) Ed's note: There's always the question—How many is many?

I wonder if Hazel Stamper is still stamping mad about something she doesn't even understand, or if she's grown another ulcer on top of the one she must already have??? Hazel dear, maybe if you'd read more letter columns instead of quitting when they began to depress you, by now you'd understand some of this "Science-Fiction slang"! For your information, and it's incredible that you couldn't have already known this, since you consider yourself a fan,—fan is the plural of fan, not just another slangified term for it! As for words that "were not meant to be abbreviated,"—I suppose you are referring to science-fiction, which you insist on spelling out so laboriously. The rest of us are just too busy to bother, when *sf* is now the standardized abbreviation, or *sf*, which stands for scientification. As to who coined it, I believe it was Hugo Gernsback, way back there in the '20's. And what in the world makes you believe that those who write to PLANET only read that one mag a month? Boy, are you way off! And I'd better quit before you find out some more things you wouldn't like to know.

Would you mind telling us if Eric Storm is somebody's pseudonym? I've never read a story of his that I haven't liked, and the SWORD OF TORMAIN this time was no exception. I suppose it's unethical to give away pseudonym secrets, but still, you could tell us merely if it was one!

Stfly,

CAROL MCKINNEY

Ed's note: Eric Storm is a London, England, author . . . and apparently that's his correct moniker.

A PLUM TO PLUMB

63 Glenridge Ave.
St. Catharines, Ont.

Dear Jack:

Again, another good Press cover for the Marsh ish . . . and again, another good illustration to confirm my maintenance that Baron Kelly is a better mechanical artist (thus more suited to *stf*) than a portrayer of femmes. Regard the cover for a moment and discover why.

You remember, Jack, how the humanoid with the monsterooid headgear was slumped over his control panel, and behind them was a BEM who was not a BEM (his eye sockets intruded, not protruded) and a quadrangular-coiffured "beauty." This latter in her own way was almost as repulsive as the BEM, which perfect contours drawn the way a cybernetic brain would draw them from collected data fed into its memory circuits.

As you know, it isn't only creative painting which makes the cover, but composition as well. The cover would have been very good except for Press hurriedly finishing off the intricate machinery in the foreground, and then this femme as an afterthought. An attractive one, but none the less it destroyed to my mind the picture's message. Femmes and BEM's are nice when there's a place for them, but not (and certainly not when they aren't well drawn) for the purpose of sticking in varied corners of the finished cover to fill up empty spaces.

Ah, hah! Jack, this makes it three times you have

sought to liven up La Vizi by injecting controversial material. Vizi was better this ish than it has been, too. But don't think we don't notice these things. While more fen may clamor for more Vizi, I suspect you'd give it to them if you could get enough letters on some controversy or other.

If you wish to do this, you might import a few trouble-makers from SS, but then I'd probably sever connections with La Vizi; because while I enjoy rootin' tootin' fights about logical things pertaining to *stf*, I detest some of the insane and maddening letters one finds there. Not all, mind you (sound familiar?), but Deek and Behrman are current examples. However, I doubt you could get them if you paid them space rates, since they are probably sick and tired of the continual barrage of retaliation, insults, and abuse they received from the fen, via mail and letter column forcing even Deek on the defensive with "Doesn't anybody like my letter?" There weren't many.

But I suppose you could start a lengthy hassle over the political system of, say, twenty centuries from now: if, pray God, Communism doesn't completely fester the Earth, what *will* future governments be like?

Could they retard to the lowest degree of feudalism as result of introversion and resentment of science after countless wars, atomic, bacteriological, or more-refined psychological of ESP? What about expanding galactic systems, with countless branches and stems of bureaus and offices, until the whole thing crumbles under sheer paperwork? Would Democracy hold up under such conditions, constantly plagued with revolutions or invasions by aliens?

And what if, as in so many science fiction novels, Earth's empire meets up with another great extra-terrestrial empire? Could Democracy bear the brunt? Indeed, perhaps the only thing which could ever pull Earth through would be direct oligarchic rule, for what powers of co-ordination, impossible to ordinary Democratic rule, would be necessary to win interspatial battles with immense distances to cover?

Or will governments of respective planets, after countless eons of rule from a planet only faintly connected with their ancestry, consider it *not* Democracy to be ruled by a single planet out of thousands, and demand the future equivalent of Democracy, on an intra-solar system scale?

To my mind, government and political affairs have more significance and will be more liable to change than anything in man's social life . . . as long as man is Christian, he will remain essentially the same; and when he isn't, he will no longer be man.

JOE KROGH

HELPING HAND

18 Winslow St.
Worcester, Mass.

Dear editor,

I'm writing this letter to find out something for a friend of mine and yours named A. Keith King of Havant, Hants, England. He asked me to find out about a picture that was awarded him for having the best letter in the VIZI. I read P.S. every month and this is the first that I have heard of such a thing myself. Keith is hot after getting this picture, so I would appreciate anything that I could forward to him in the way of information.

In the March ish of P.S. I rate all the stories 'above average'. Excellent were THE MAN THE TECH-MEN MADE, THE PURPLE PARIAS, SWORD OF TORMAIN, MORLEY'S WEAPON, and last but not least, GRANDMA PERKINS AND THE SPACE PIRATES.

Good were MIMSEY'S JOKE, THE GALACTIC GHOST and THE TOY. All in all a very good ish. I'm a professional artist so here's a pro's opinion (no conceit), ALL the pictures were good. There, that should make you feel good until the next ish. See you around, son.

Your Friend,

BILL OIKLE

Ed's note: You'll find answer to your query in May ish under Mr. King's letter.

DIRTY CARPET

100 Wayne Street
Providence 8, R. I.

Dear Editor,

As is my unpleasant custom everytime I bring a new SF mag to my favorite 2nd hand bookstore and take home a handful of used ones to read from Saturday to Saturday, I take typewriter in hand and write the Editor of the mag I'm turning in and give him my unwanted opinion of that particular issue. New custom I'm installing.

Now for PLANET Stories September 1953 issue:

COVER: Thanks for having a cover pertaining to one of the stories instead of being symbolic and making it fairly realistic. Been too many covers recently showing a man and woman in tight fitting plastic space suits waltzing around on thin air or no air at all.

Story that cover relates to states party left spaceship via a sled and landed on a robot ship designed to destroy them. Impossible—way cover shows the people going from one ship to another is slightly irritating. And the suits they wear are a bit too skimpy for ABSOLUTE ZERO temperature and a vacuum! Especially the gal's suit which emphasizes her—eh, ah—charms, shall we say. But I ignore it. If I live long enough I may see a cover without flaws. I judge an article's pleasure by its freedom from flaws, in the case of a story, by its being logical and intelligently written and not being a rehash of some other story or a thin worn out plot.

BUNZO FAREWELL: Drawing on pages 4-5 fairly good and a lot better than the stuff turned out by Virgil Finlay. Good for you. STORY. Only flaw is difficulty in believing a skinny bony ant-like creature comes out of the pudgy fat clober. Kind of sorry villain had to die.

THE FLIGHT OF THE EAGLE: Interesting enough story so I wasn't bored. Usual hero-dies-to-save-type of ending. Seen that a half dozen times.

MISS TWEEDHAM'S ELOGARISIN: Drawing pages 26-27. Fairly good. Had to look at it 3 times to see the meaning of the faint lines on page 26. Suppose to symbolize the shrinking of the unusually lovely girl with (for once) thighs that aren't sickeningly fat and jiggle as most women's are. Hmm. The Martian has talons! I had a different picture in mind of Big Marie. You made her quite lovely. And Miss Tweedham you left out!

THE UNRECONSTRUCTED WOMAN: I read this story twice before the many questions in my mind were answered. Drawing page 37. Naturally she had to have long, long hair covering up her best physical features. Oh well. You mean Paul is willing to marry this half civilized wild woman? Brave man to take on a job like that.

PREVIEW OF PERIL: Drawing page 45. Don't get the point behind the drawing showing construction of a boat for use on WATER. Its connection with SPACE WARFARE AND SPACE TRAVEL??? Fairly good logical story using the old booby trap device to blow up the enemy.

WHERE SEX MET SPACE: Drawing page 57. Hmm. Quite a nice shape and face on the heroine. If they are thousands of feet off land where is their powers of movement, their jets, their rockets? Usual man and woman beats big bad enemy type of story. So he married the girl due to their isolation so long. Reminds me of cartoon I saw in English joke book not too long ago.

DEATH STAR: Not too bad. One thing bothered me. The meaning of the very last sentence. Did he walk off a cliff? Did he try to make a home on the small unnamed planet? No chance he'd be rescued?

THE ARK OF MARS. Drawing: pages 74-75. The mechanical creature would have been a lot better looking if he didn't have the 2 crab-like claws your artist gave him. Since his job was cutting up metal sheets to weld in the hole cut by the people burning their way thru the wall of his ship, you should have given him more servicable hands and digits. The hole they neatly burned thru you have portrayed as if it were a shell hole or made by a meteor. Why a jagged hole like this would have to be trimmed and leveled off before a sheet of metal could be welded into place. The part about Marsh and Kirby on page 82 and thereabouts isn't worth reading. And the hidden meaning the author put into his remarks. Like "You are not a man" page 82. Rest of story pretty good.

Cordially,

CHARLES R. MAYTUM

HOLD-EN THE BUS, PLEASE

Grove School
Madison, Conn.

Dear Jack,

To begin with, there is the matter of Hazel Stamp-er's letter in your March issue. I am allowing myself to point out to her that her facts are wrong. (1) She could not be a "fen," as I believe that is the plural of fan. (2) And she can't be a hyphenated F-a-n, as "Hyphen" is supposed to be funny and is, while her alleged letter is not meant to be funny. All it is good for are hearty guffaws.

Now down the Vizi path. . .

Cal Beck: I believe that Martin Alger has been linked with the revival of the term "Bem". This could be because of his collecting and the liaison with the Detroit group dominant in fandom during the post-war years.

Don Allen: As much as I am in sympathy with you, I keep thinking of the Australian contingent and their clashes with the Customs boys.

Carol McKinney: They have group marriages like that right here in our fannish ranks . . . at least, the analogies are there.

Joe Keogh: Well put, amigo, well put.

Claude Hall: Man, this cat digs how to get up the outtest letters. Why not ask Sarg to do some side work? Like modeling for fanzine bems. By the by, Walker is a gal young'n.

Christoff: VAL WALKER IS A GIRL OR ELSE SOMEONE IS BEING MISLED!!!

The rest of the letters don't mean much, though its nice to see friend Ron rearing his . . . head and exhibiting his eliktrik personality.

Best missives: (1) Keogh, (2) Hall, (3) McKinney.

Joe Keogh says to go out and seek the name writers. In my letter to the Vizi, I begged for grooming new blood. Now, I feel you've hit somewhat of a medium with Fox B. Holden, who has been around awhile but is just beginning to really sell. He comes forth with beautifully detailed description in the tradition of Leigh Brackett. Too, Fox, manages to

integrate ideas on a par with H. L. Gold's postulates into stories that contain the hair-raising action prerequisite to PLANET'S novels.

The last time I had cause to be in New Haven, I took the liberty of phoning Fox. I found myself courteously received and engaged in interesting conversation; so interesting, that by the time our phone conversation was finished, I had missed the bus back up the shore to school, though I headed it off later in a cab.

So I close with a plea for more Fox B. Holden and the addition of trimmed edges.

Ever So Perceptively (ESP),
BURTON K. BEERMAN

TEE VEE TIP

4839 Shelby Ave.
Jax. 10, Fla.

Dear Sir,

Hark to the science fiction world! Achtung Fen! How long can we stand this influencing of the public to believe stf is synonymous with Rod Brown, Tom Corbett, etc.?

It seems to us that some plan should be devised whereby one of the T. V. networks could produce a "Highbrow" program in which true science fiction could be presented.

For instance, here is a feeble plan which may merit approval: Half hour show. . . . The first 15 minutes of which will be dedicated to science, the science fiction world, bulletins, letters, etc. A stf adventure story of some kind will take up the last 15 minutes. A novel could very well be broken up into chapters (these stories will be taken from those published in the prozines, naturally). And mayhap sponsored by one or a group of leading magazines.

A program of this sort might help to increase the pitifully small amount of fen in the country and also gain some respect from the laymen for true stf.

Come now fen, let's have a deluge of letters with your valued opinions.

This is a bit too late to talk of Wood's lilo in the September ish, but having been some what followers of him (thru the E.C. line), and regarding him as THE leading cartoonist, we were pleased pink to see that he was finally called upon to draw for a prozine. The response from the readers proves that others like his work too. More Wood—maybe even (oh joy) a cover!

Next portion of our epistle is entitled "Joe Keogh's Tales of Woe": S'matter, Joe, huh . . . s'matter? Don't you like anything? Every time we open to the letter page of a mag . . . any mag, we see your "editorial" leering at us. And naturally the gist of every one of them is: Joe Keogh don't like the illos, Joe Keogh don't like the lettering, Joe Keogh don't like the covers, Joe Keogh don't like the letters, Joe

Keogh don't like the stories. S'matter, Joe, . . . huh, bwah, . . . don't you even like yourself?

Now we roll around to Leigh Brackett, who has been creating such a stir in your mag lately. A fine writer, there being only one story of hers we didn't like: LORELEI OF THE RED MIST, written in collaboration with Ray Bradbury. This one was utterly ghastly. Letters? 1. Paul Mittlebuscher, 2. Don Wegars, 3. Joe (smiley) Keogh.

Yours til a month goes by
without a Joe Keogh letter,
JOHN MUSSELLS AND
RALPH BUTCHER

THE "FINK" LEGEND

Box 41
Brunswick, Maine

Dear Mr. O'Sullivan,

Having been an old FAN for years I thought I would write my first fan letter to take a stand with Miss Hazel Stamper on the use of abbreviations and all that. They have their place, and it's not in a fan letter. After being in the Service for several years I have seen all the abbreviations that I want to see. Then when I get my favorite magazine, start to read it—what do I see on the first page? A fan letter full of abbreviations.

Then we have the self-styled experts. My only comment on them is "If you are so D— smart, why ain't you rich?"

I read to relax, not to pick a story apart or tear the author up. The stories I like I may read again at a later date. The ones that I don't like I forget about.

Then you ask, what is a "fink"? The expression "Fink" came from the story of Mike Fink and the man he raised and took care of from childhood. This man's name was Carpenter. Mike Fink and Carpenter were both excellent shots and would shoot a small whiskey glass from each others heads at a distance of 60 to 100 paces. One time there was an argument over a woman, I believe, and they were settling it by this marksmanship.

To make a long story short, Mike Fink shot and killed Carpenter. Fink was also shot and killed a few days later. This was in 1823. Since then, anyone or anything that was distasteful, or that people disliked for various reasons, was referred to as a "Fink", after the man who shot and killed his best friend.

Also I don't believe that Miss Stamper could very well look like a Fink unless she is a Lady Wrestler, because Mike Fink was one of the strongest men on the Mississippi River.

On the magazine, I like the idea of the shorter stories being in front and the longer ones in the back.

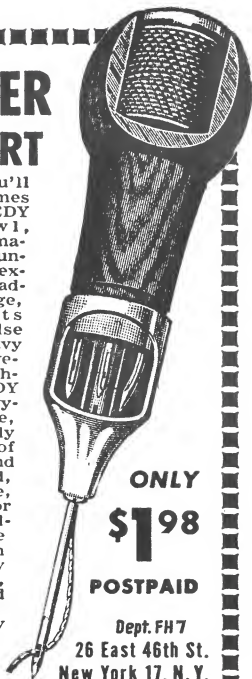
Now that you have been enlightened, I shall sit back and await repercussions.

An old fan,
J. T. GOOD

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